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FALLOUT 3

BETHESDA'S MIND-BLOWING RPG!

PAGE 26

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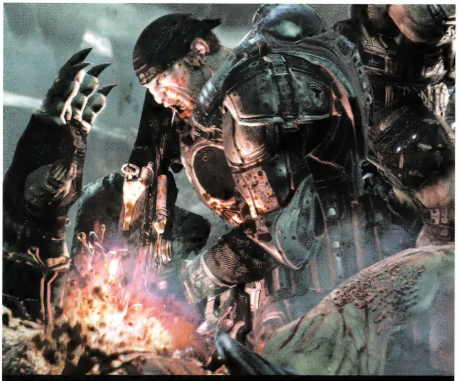

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52 **Gears of War**

Sometimes it pays to wait. The PC version of Epic's Xbox 360 blockbuster comes with a new multiplayer mode, new campaign missions, and more that'll make your console-only friends extremely jealous.

DEPARTMENTS

14 **Editorial**

Editor-in-chief Jeff Green welcomes *Gears of War* to the PC with open arms. He does the same with *Fallout 3*, and then gets radiation poisoning.

16 **Letters**

Is revealing how a game begins a cardinal sin? One reader thinks so...and there will be blood.

20 **Start**

PC gaming gets a bad case of colon-itis with *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Mercenaries 2: World in Flames*, and *Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties*. Also: Researchers say videogames may be *good* for your brain.

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66 **Hall of Fame**

It's the first post–*Computer Gaming World* installment of our Hall of Fame, where we canonize the very best PC games and designers for all eternity.

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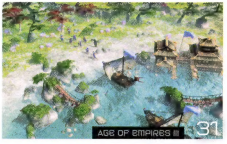

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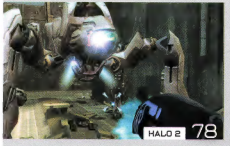
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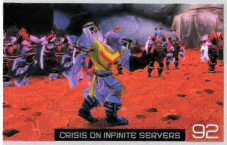
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DEPARTMENTS (CONT.)

72 Reviews

We play through *Halo 2* and *Shadowrun*, the first two PC games to utilize Microsoft's Games for Windows Live service—and the results are less than stellar. We also chime in on Lara Croft's newest makeover and tour *Dungeon Runners*, NCsoft's free tongue-in-cheek *Diablo* clone.

88 Extend

Casual-games columnist Robert Coffey examines a few casual-gaming websites, while MMO maven Miguel Lopez discusses *World of WarCraft*'s competitive side. Also, Tom and Bruce battle to the death in *Peggle*, *Diner Dash*, and *Solitaire*. Hey, you guys forgot *Minesweeper*.

96 Tech

Don't let your lame PC hardware keep you from enjoying the latest games. Our Poor Man's Guide to Graphics tells you what high-tech features to turn on (or keep off) with minimal effect on performance.

102 Greenspeak

Get your water effects away from me! Graphics don't mean diddly if you don't have anything fun for Jeff to do in your fancy little game.

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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW09.1UP.COM

Get more info straight from the mouths of Mark Rein and Cliff Bleszinski on the PC version of *Gears of War*. Plus: Watch videos of some of the craziest *Line Rider* courses ever constructed.

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GEAR HEAD

Exclusive preview of the previews inside

Yay! A console port that's not going to take five years to get here! While it was frustrating that Epic's *Gears of War* was an Xbox 360–only game last year, the good news is that the PC port is already well on the way, as detailed in this month's fine cover story by Start editor Shawn Elliott. As he always does, Mr. Elliott asks real questions in this story, and not just the easy softballs and ass-kissy obsequiousness ("How awesome *is* your game?!") this industry of ours tends to revel in. It helps, for sure, that the guys at Epic are so forthright and honest. Folks like Mark Rein and Cliff Bleszinski are, in fact, quote machines: All you have to do is turn on the voice recorder and off they go, writing your story for you, with no nervous PR folks in the background flop sweating as they try to "control the message." Check it out even if shooters aren't your thing—it's a great read.

While we're on the subject of upcoming games, let me also direct your attention to one more preview guaranteed to delight and amaze you, or at least make you forget for a few moments that you are a mortal being whose life will one day end. I refer to *Fallout 3*, the long-rumored, long-awaited reboot of the legendary RPG series that seemed—what with the original design team at Interplay/Black Isle Studios long gone—like it would remain on ice for forever (*Fallout 2* came out in 1998). When we learned a while back that the franchise was being picked up by Bethesda Softworks, makers of the sensational *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*—our 2006 Game of the Year—we were excited, but many questions remained. Would Bethesda be able to maintain the series' distinct tone and humor? Would they be able to take the gameplay and graphics to a level that makes sense for today's gamers? We sent freelance writer (and former *OPM* senior editor) Joe Rybicki out to Bethesda, Maryland, to look at the game—and his preview is in this issue. Decide for yourself whether to praise or bury the game.

Finally, while I am in salesman mode, let me remind you once again to join us every Tuesday for *GFW Radio*, our weekly foray into the wacky world of sound. We hear it's gonna be *big* someday! Jump on that bandwagon at podcasts.1UP.com, mmmkay?

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *Tomb Raider: Anniversary, World of WarCraft, Pac-Man Championship Edition* (Xbox Live Arcade)
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

After a fling with some Vista shooters, will the relative calm of *World of WarCraft* welcome me back? $14.99 says "Yes."

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft, Shadowrun, Halo 2*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren secretly posts on message boards arguing that *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* is one of the most insightful social satires of our time.

Now Playing: *Sam & Max: Season 1,* [illegible]
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

After weathering what was possibly the biggest confluence of editorial disasters in a single issue of *GFW*, Ryan's settling down with *The Lord of the Rings Online* again.

Now Playing: *The Lord of the Rings Online*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

Shawn publicly posts on message boards arguing that Darren's *Gremlins 2* commentary is among the most awful social satires of our time.

Now Playing: [illegible] *Wars, World in Conflict*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

A big thanks to the Epic team. Hoo-rah!!!

Now Playing: *Gears of War* (Xbox 360)
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

War—what is it good for? Apparently it's perfect for the titles of PC games.

Now Playing: Do I really need to say it? Nintendo DS.
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Letters

This one goes out to you

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Egyptian Spartans fight for chicken teriyaki burritos.

HISTORICAL INACCURACIES

The line "Before the reign of Tarkhan, Leonidas dined on Xerxes" (*Ancient Wars: Sparta* review, GFW #8, pg. 78) is about as historically accurate as George Washington skipping a silver dollar across the Potomac. And I thought you actually had to have a degree to work for your mag. Tarkhan is a Turkish dish. It has about as much to do with Greece as Nancy Pelosi (born with) supporting the U.S. troops. While the Greeks have tried to claim it as their own, along with many other things, it is pretty well documented that Tarkhan is Turkish.

Sean Wattles

SPOILER ALERT

Sean Molloy is on my list, and not the good one. I've been a faithful subscriber for some time now, all the way back to the glory days when you were known simply as *CGW*. I finally have the motivation to write [to] your mostly harmless magazine. It was only a few paragraphs into the *BioShock* preview (*GFW* #8, pg. 22) when a nasty spoiler was burned into my brain. And while it wasn't as nearly as cruel as an idiot screaming [spoiler alert—Ed.] "Snape kills Dumbledore!" out the window of a passing car to fans outside a bookstore, your unforewarned spoiler has ruined at least a small part of the game for me. A bit of vagueness would have been in order, or at last some spoiler warning before you basically gave [a] play-by-play of the game's opening. I understand that this is a preview of game and at least some of the information will be revealed, but please, leave the details out. And just for a bit of payback: In *Titanic* the ship sinks, in *Apollo 13* they make it back home safe, in *300* they all die, and Vader is Luke's father.

Spoiler alert! Big Daddy protects Little Sister!

Jeff Jankosky

Come on, your turnabout's not exactly fair play, is it? Comparable "payback" spoilers would have been: "The *Titanic* launches on its maiden voyage, the astronauts of *Apollo 13* are in trouble, in *300* they all go to war, and Vader is chasing after Princess Leia." The (spoiler alert?) plane crash at the beginning of *Lost* wasn't some great secret.

ONE WORD

I've got one word for you.... Just one word.... Aquadynamic Fish Attractor.

Howie

Nicely played. But were you expecting Contagious Exquisite Decoder Ring of the Nihilistic Crocodile? Your turn, Howie.

THE WORLD HAS MOVED ON

It's nice that the people you interviewed in the *World of WarCraft* cover story (*GFW* #7, pg. 48) mentioned their favorite areas, bosses, and raids. It's too bad that most of these are no longer visited as the content in *The Burning Crusade* has rendered any and all loot out of these instances obsolete in less than three weeks of questing. Ragnaros was mentioned two times: As a denizen of Molten Core, he gets very few if any visitors these days. Onyxia? When was the last time her head (never mind Nefarian's head) was seen in Orgrimmar or Stormwind? Blackwing Lair? AQ40? Naxx? Phttt!! Why bother?

And that is the biggest failing of *TBC*. In one expansion, Blizzard has removed any and all reasons to venture into pre-*TBC* high-end instances.

Rick Fortier

Are you seriously complaining that you never have to go back to Molten Core again? Really?

BACK IN MY DAY

I'm getting pretty tired of everyone saying how "old" they are. Jeff Green usually says it three times in each issue, and there is usually at least one letter from a reader about the "gray-hair crowd." News flash: The people playing the games and reading the magazines are all of us 30- to 50-year-olds with the money and time to do it. So please stop whining. Jeff Green—you are not old.

Jeff

Jeff Green replies: "I really need to stop writing letters to myself like this just to feel better. Still, though, thanks Jeff! I think you're hot, too."

Rearrange the alphabet into patterns we like, and you may end up here! Write GFWletters@ziffdavis.com.

MAIL BYTES

Why would you tell us about Piggie? Why?! I hate you.

Anonymous

I am especially enamored with [your] Free Play section. While both Microsoft and Sony have touted their [console] services as a haven for independent and small-time development houses, the PC continues to serve as the home for a thriving neighborhood indie game development community.

Charles Ellis

As I sit and watch other gamers play, I notice their fingers crammed onto arrow keys while still using the mouse in first-person shooters. When I inform them of the bountiful fruit of WASD, they glare and reply that they can't remember where to put their fingers.

Andromines

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Start

News, Previews, and Pert Opinion

"I WOULDN'T SAY WE WERE DYING TO DO MODERN WARFARE1 OFF THE BAT–LIKE 'OH MY GOD, NO MORE WORLD WAR III'– BUT IT WAS A NATURAL MOVE FOR US."

–VINCE ZAMPELLA, CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, INFINITY WARD

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WORLD WAR NEW

Infinity Ward talks *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* multiplayer

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Infinity Ward** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2007**

One good perk deserves another: Apparently, gas mask unlocks counter tear gas upgrades.

INTERVIEW

Vince Zampella
CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, CO-STUDIO HEAD

Jason West
PROJECT LEAD, CO-STUDIO HEAD

Todd Alderman
MULTIPLAYER LEAD DESIGNER

GFW: You've wanted to move *Call of Duty* into a modern context for a while, yeah?
VINCE ZAMPELLA: Ideas we floated around wouldn't fit in World War II. I wouldn't say we were dying to do it off the bat—like, "Oh my god, no more World War II!"—but it was a natural move for us. We're able to write our own story this time, which is something we've always wanted to do. You know, with WWII you have to worry about historical accuracy. With this, we're able to work in whatever locations we want, whichever characters we want to use. Modern weapons let us introduce a lot of gun modifications, different gadgets—things like that. Communication options improve with radio and satellite intel—it allows us to broaden what our levels show you and in a believable way.

GFW: For example?
VZ: In one level, an AC-130 (ground attack airplane) flies in and saves your ass. Later, you get to jump into the gunner's seat and see the battlefield in another light. It adds to the variety of gameplay that we're going for.

GFW: Sounds similar to *Call of Duty: United Offensive*'s B-17 bomber mission, though, doesn't it? Are *Modern Warfare*'s locations rooted in real life?
VZ: Yeah. Russia is very accurate, and you'll recognize a lot of locations. For the sake of sensitivity, the Middle East is more nondescript.

GFW: How is the contemporary setting shaping your multiplayer content?
VZ: Well, we're able to do a lot more with the weapons, for one thing. As I said, we're introducing different attachments to customize your weapons with. You can recamouflage guns, tweak the way they look. And we have high-tech perks, like radar jamming and eavesdropping, which lets you hear the enemy team's voice chat.

GFW: Are you creating new modes to capitalize on these changes?
VZ: We're not ready to divulge all of the multiplayer modes right now, since some of them are still in testing. We are bringing back some stuff from *Call 2*, though: Team Deathmatch, Free-for-All, Search and Destroy, Capture the Flag. In addition, we're adding different rules over these, so while you've got CTF, you can also play Hardcore CTF, which is our realism mode.

GFW: This makes sense on PC, since realism mods are so prolific, right?
TODD ALDERMAN: Really, that's where it comes from. The community always adds that to the game, so we're giving it to them straight out of the box.

GFW: Let's talk about unlockable perks. What's the plan?
VZ: Well, we're doing good balancing the game...you start with your base classes—all of which begin with perks—and, as you level up, you get new perks. These change the game, but not to the point that a high-level player is clearly more powerful than you. So you look at the list of possible perks, decide to take this or that, and the downside is that you only get one. When you pick that perk, you're eliminating the other 10 that you could've taken, so it balances itself out that way. Same thing with weapons—all the guns and attachments have strengths and weaknesses. If you equip a silencer you're not dealing as much damage, but then you're not showing up on the radar either.
TA: Yeah, perks are divided into three different categories. So, say, the radar jammer is in the same category...
VZ: ...as Stopping Power, which doubles bullet damage, or Juggernaut, which boosts health. But you can only take one for each build, and that's where the balance is.

GFW: Are we swapping these in and out every time we spawn, or only once when we join the server? >

Suspect a lousy hacker shot you through the skull? The *Call of Duty series'* Killcam helps you prove it.

VZ: When you join. You're allotted slots with the class you create, and you can change what goes in them from outside the game. Once you join a server, though, you're committed to that class. You can create five different classes and can change whatever you want while in the menus or lobby.
TA: Make an offensive guy, a flag runner...
VZ: Absolutely. It all depends on the modes you prefer playing.

GFW: Any medic-like loadouts?
VZ: Not healing or reviving. We do have the Last Stand perk, though—instead of dying instantly, you drop down and pull out your pistol before you bleed out. There's Martyrdom, where you drop a grenade as you die.

GFW: You want to reward people who play over and over again. How confident are you in your ability to avoid scenarios where first-time players are facing pros who have the added advantage of perks?
VZ: Juggernaut and Stopping Power are some of the starting perks. You get the ones that offer an advantage right at the beginning. We've been balancing this thing for over a year now.

GFW: Can you choose to play on "pure" servers with no perks whatsoever?
VZ: Yeah. We'll have ranked and unranked servers. Unranked games are completely customizable.

GFW: Are you paying much attention to other multiplayer shooters with similar systems? Specifically, *Battlefield 2142*.
TA: Yeah, I've played pretty much every multiplayer game. You see what works and what doesn't work. Diehards who play all day and all night will get rewards, just not ones that unbalance the game. It's like you can pimp yourself out with a gold AK-47....
VZ: ...scopes for your assault rifle, sights, silencers, foregrips to stabilize your weapon.

GFW: You can carry only two weapons at once?
VZ: Yeah, you get one primary weapon—an assault rifle, submachine gun, sniper rifle, whatever—and a sidearm. Attachments work with pistols, too. Then there's the Dual Wield perk, which lets you swap out the pistol for a second primary weapon. You sacrifice Stopping Power or Juggernaut, but you're packing two weapons.

GFW: What about lifting weapons off of dead opponents?
VZ: Yes, so if someone has a supercool customized weapon, you can use it until you die and kind of preview potential unlocks.

GFW: Why no vehicles? They worked well in *Call of Duty: United Offensive*.
TA: Maps with vehicles tend to be larger, where the fighting is less centralized and...it's just not as intense, not the experience we're going for.
VZ: What we're doing with air support, the airstrikes and helicopters, gives us the same feeling that something big is going on but without the problems that vehicles introduce: too much traveling, too many guys fighting to fly the helicopter....

GFW: Can you shoot down the helos that opponents call in?
VZ: Yeah, but rocket launchers aren't perfectly accurate. The longer the shot, the more your rocket wavers on the way in, so it's not exactly easy. You'll see lots of cool scenes where a chopper's coming in and everyone's shooting rockets, with smoke trails everywhere.

GFW: And those smoke trails tell the enemy where you're firing from. What other cool moments are emerging?
VZ: OK, we're fighting in this hallway, and one of my buddies drops down, pistols firing, in Last Stand. He hits one guy and knocks *him* into Last Stand, and they're fighting from the floor.
TA: A three-kill streak gives you radar, and, if you're fast enough, a five-kill streak gets you an airstrike.

So you use the radar information to designate the airstrike, jets fly in, drop their cluster bombs—and with that, a seven-kill streak gets you the helicopter.

GFW: Are your multiplayer maps largely reworked from existing campaign assets and locations?
VZ: We've made original maps just for multiplayer, and we've pulled some stuff from single-player. This time around, we've even had times where we've taken single-player stuff from the multiplayer.

GFW: Were destructible environments and/or a cover system ever in the design document?
TA: Cars blow up, and the wreckage serves as cover....
VZ: Cover is important. We don't want to leave a bare landscape for firefights. But we also have bullet-penetration properties—you can shoot through walls and wood fences.

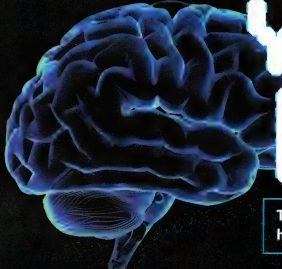
GFW: Are all interior props still glued into position the way they were in *Call of Duty*, or will grenades blow them around?
VZ: Yeah, you throw a grenade into a room, and lamps and whatnot go flying.
JASON WEST: During prototyping, we tried a destructible system. Walls broke away from buildings, everything blew up, top to bottom, and it was fun for like the first minute of a firefight. But after shredding these buildings, you'd just walk through two-by-fours and the gameplay just broke down. We wound up throwing that out.

GFW: No man's land: That might work with few players and a no-respawn rule. Hacking was pervasive in the PC version of *Call of Duty 2*. Eventually you added PunkBuster cheat prevention, and players circumvented that almost immediately.
VZ: We will have anticheat out of the box. I can't say what right now, but we're committed. We also support ranked servers, which track things....

GFW: And the Killcam almost always gives cheaters away. Maybe it's not so much that *Call of Duty 2* attracted more cheaters than most games, but that we could confirm our suspicions.
TA: You just made Jason's day today. [*Laughs*]
JW: You get the prize for appreciating that.
TA: And Killcam shows you perks. So say you're shooting someone and it's like, damn it, this guy just won't go down. Then in the Killcam you see that he's using Juggernaut and Iron Lung perks.
JW: Iron Lung lets him hold his breath longer while sniping, so he's a sort of supercamper. I'm a sucker for asymmetric balance, so I love the create-a-class stuff.

GFW: Back to the single-player: You've said that everything, including exposition, works from first-person perspective? How thoroughly are you integrating narrative with rat-a-tat gameplay?
JW: Only the movies in between levels are noninteractive. Otherwise, exposition and story are integrated with gameplay.
VZ: For example, you're in a Blackhawk helicopter, belted in—that's how we impose some control on the situation. You're free to look around, only you're in a fixed place.
JW: Or in the coup sequence...guys have got your arms and are dragging you out of the palace. This isn't a cut-scene. They throw you in the back of a car and train a gun on you. You're trapped there, looking around as they drive you off to assassinate you. You're helpless, but you're playing.

GFW: Are you designing with downloadable content or expansion packs in mind?
VZ: We will support this game. We don't have any plans in place, though, not like "three downloadable maps in February" or something. • **Shawn Elliott**



YOUR BRAIN ON

The next scientific revolution will be digitized—videogames have infiltrated the front lines of medical research

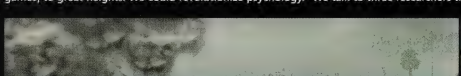
TRENDS

Your brain's a curious thing. Somehow that squishy, unremarkable blob manages to keep your heart pumping and your pancreas doing whatever it does while also overseeing the virtual framework of the mind. How exactly the brain does all this has puzzled researchers for centuries, and scientists have relied on everything from drills to electroshock therapy to unlock its secrets.

Now the brainiacs have brought in the big guns: videogames.

In recent years, scientists have turned to games as a tool in neurological research. Some psychologists use games to explore and decode the mind-body connection, deciphering the roots of depression or how the visual system works. Others use games to diagnose and treat emotional disorders like anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

So what is it about videogames that makes them so appealing to researchers? "There's just so much creativity in the game industry," says Skip Rizzo, a clinical psychologist at the University of Southern California and director of the school's Virtual Environments Lab. "If we can just funnel a fraction of that into things that have some social relevance beyond entertainment, we can really take [computer games] to great heights. We could revolutionize psychology." We talk to three researchers trying to do just that. ● **Lara Crigger**



TREATING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

● **A head-mounted display re creates traumatic memories for therapeutic purposes.**

If a videogame looks like Iraq, sounds like Iraq, and even smells like Iraq, does it still count as a game? Maybe not, thinks Rizzo. Maybe it could be more.

Rizzo and his colleagues have spent years developing a virtual reality therapy called Virtual Iraq, designed to rehabilitate returning veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

According to current estimates, PTSD, an anxiety disorder that results from exposure to life-threatening events, affects as many as 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. But treating the disorder is difficult due to the military stigma attached to touchy-feely "talk" therapy.

Virtual Iraq takes a different approach, instead allowing vets to literally step inside their traumatic memories via a virtual environment based off Academic Studies' Full Spectrum Warrior. Patients view a 3D rendition of the Iraq landscape in a head-mounted display, while the therapist, sitting at a control panel, tailors the terrain down to the smallest detail, from the time of day to the number of pedestrians, in order to better mimic patients' specific memories. The setup also includes vibration mechanisms and a smell box, which pumps eight distinct aromas into a subject's nose, such as cooked lamb, burning rubber, body odor, and rotting garbage. The point is to make it real—scary real. "We take a lot of feedback from people who were in Iraq," says Rizzo, "[as well as] the clinicians who listened to what those soldiers had to say."

Usually, patients start off slowly. In his or her first session, a vet might just stand outside a Humvee, with no engine sounds, passengers, or even roads included. But that simple scenario is enough to make many PTSD sufferers anxious.

Gradually, however, the person acclimates to that scene and when they become comfortable enough, the therapist introduces more unmerciful elements, like screaming insurgents, nearby explosions, and wounded bodies. Eventually, with practice, patients are able to confront their worst memories without anxiety. "It's because you introduce stimuli that's more provocative, that raises anxiety levels, but at a manageable pace," explains Rizzo.

Recently, Virtual Iraq entered clinical testing at 10 research facilities. "We're just now starting to get the results," says Rizzo. Four people have completed the full course of treatment, he says, and in three of those case studies, patients completely overcame their PTSD.

Rizzo wants to improve the simulation enough so it could be used as an assessment tool to determine which returning vets might develop PTSD. "Instead of just throwing questions at them when they get off the plane, we can have soldiers try out this scenario," he says. "We want to evolve it into a comprehensive research program."

VIDEOGAMES

IMPROVING VISION

Forget carrots; now videogames can improve your vision, too. According to a new study from the University of Rochester, playing action-based videogames, particularly first-person shooters, can beef up your feeble eyes by strengthening your ability to resolve visual clutter.

How well we can pick out one object from many is a crucial component in our visual systems. "If you have a better ability to resolve clutter, you'll be able to read smaller text," explains Daphne Bavelier, associate director of the Rochester Center for Brain Imaging and lead researcher on the project. It's also the same skill that helps a gamer distinguish enemies from allies or headcrabs from scientists. "We think action videogames actually force the visual system to extract information from the visual scene more efficiently."

Bavelier and Shawn Green, her PhD candidate, gave 32 nongamers a visual acuity test in which subjects pick out the orientation of one T surrounded by other Ts. The subjects were then randomly divided into two groups: one that played *Unreal Tournament 2004* for 30 hours, and another that played *Tetris* for the same amount of time. Afterward, the subjects were given the eye test again. The *Unreal* players showed a 20 percent improvement on their scores.

Bavelier believes that *Unreal* improved subjects' vision because the game requires constant focus and attention. "You're on the edge all the time," she says. "You never know when or where things are going to happen." That visual uncertainty, she says, drives the brain to improve its neural pathways so it can keep pace with the action.

Tetris, on the other hand, doesn't feature the same kind of visual uncertainty in its gameplay, even though it too requires fast reflexes and good hand-eye coordination. "It's not particularly demanding for the visual system," says Bavelier. "You have one object to interact with."

But the changes experienced by the *Unreal* players were in their minds, says Bavelier, not their eyes. "We're not going to put LensCrafters out of business here," she says. Eyes with physical defects will remain bad eyes, no matter how many videogames you might play.

Instead, she hopes to one day apply this research in a prototype for visual rehabilitation software. Patients with reduced or low-level vision problems like amblyopia (lazy eye) could use programs that mimic FPSes to teach their brains how to recognize objects more efficiently.

Bavelier is expanding her research into other genres. "It's not that we're invested in action videogames. We're invested in changing vision."

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

Beware, depression: Neda Gould is here to kick ass and chew bubble gum, and she's all out of gum.

She and her colleagues at the National Institute of Mental Health's Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program used a modified version of *Duke Nukem 3D* to explore the underlying factors behind clinical depression (as if waiting for *Duke Nukem Forever* weren't depressing enough).

Clinical depression, a debilitating cocktail of lethargy, anxiety, and overwhelming sadness, strikes about 21 million adults in America each year. The exact causes are still unclear, but recent research suggests that there's a link between depression and the size of the hippocampus, a seahorse-shaped squiggle in the brain that regulates mood, memory, and spatial navigation. Depressed patients have considerably smaller hippocampi than healthy people, but "we don't know if that's a cause of the depression, or something that happens after an individual becomes depressed," says Gould.

To better understand that chicken/egg relationship, Gould's team tested 30 people who suffered from depression and bipolar disorder—plus 19 people who didn't—to see how well they could remember their way around a 3D virtual town. The researchers used a bare-bones version of *Duke Nukem 3D* stripped of its characters, enemies, and missions, with only the map itself left intact. As users navigated the simplified environment, screenshots of specific locations—such as a bar or a cathedral—would pop up. When players went to that spot in the game, they'd receive a new destination to find, like a visual scavenger hunt.

After a short training session to familiarize themselves with the map, test subjects had to find as many destinations as they could within two three-minute time frames. Three days later, they returned to the lab and performed the same task again, but this time with different destinations.

• Clinically depressed subjects performed poorly when asked to remember their way around a rudimentary *Duke Nukem 3D* map.

The healthy group had no trouble recalling the layout of the town; on average, they found 3.8 locations within the allotted time period. But the depressed patients scored far worse, finding an average of only 2.4 locations. In addition, the more severely depressed the subject, the worse he or she performed on the test. That suggests the game, or at least the idea of navigating a 3D environment, could be used to identify the exact degree of depression in affected patients.

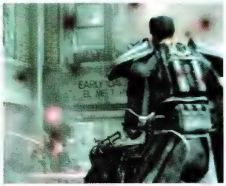
But Gould says *Duke Nukem* has a long way to go before it could be used as a diagnostic tool. In its current form, the simulation doesn't provide enough information for any in-depth analysis. "Depression varies from individual to individual," she says. "There's a lot of heterogeneity within the disorder, and we wouldn't want to miss that by simplifying things down too much."

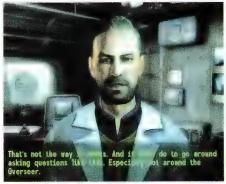
• *Fallout 3*'s "action point" system allows twitchaphobic players to queue up attacks as in a turn-based RPG.

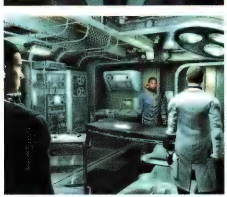
FALLOUT 3

Bethesda resurrects yesterday's world of tomorrow

PUBLISHER: **Bethesda Softworks** DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks** GENRE: **Role-Playing Game** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2008**







PREVIEW

"War. War never changes." These words are a trademark of the *Fallout* series, from its spectacular beginning to its embarrassingly opportunistic spin-offs. Gravel-voiced Ron Perlman delivers the lines with a world-weary gravity form-fit to the bleak setting of this retro-futuristic, postapocalyptic future, while mellow oldies noodle in the background, exemplifying the series' black humor.

The funny thing is, war *does* change. It changed when *Fallout 2* introduced bizarrely out-of-place pop-culture references. It changed when *Fallout Tactics* streamlined the game to nothing *but* war. It changed when *Brotherhood of Steel* (Xbox and PS2) foisted its hack-n-slash atrocities upon an unsuspecting public.

And it's changing again with *Fallout 3*. With new developer Bethesda applying its *Elder Scrolls* experience to the now-classic series, the game can't help but be a departure from what we've seen before. But here's the thing: In many ways, it's changing *back*—back to the original vision of a serious role-playing game set in the grim remains of an ironically optimistic world. Back to the complex story and characterization *Tactics* and *Brotherhood of Steel* forsook. And back to the dark humor and legitimately *adult* themes the series slowly edged away from.

SETTING THE TONE

Executive producer Todd Howard cites character and story development, '50s-influenced, world-of-tomorrow style, and "funny violence" as key features the new team is attempting to evoke with *Fallout 3*. "*Fallout 1*, in particular, is our model, or our 'tone setting,' for this game," he says. "*Tactics* and *Brotherhood of Steel*—we pretty much ignore their existence, much in the same way I ignore *Aliens 3* and *4*."

Howard further explains the tone: "Picture the [future] as they saw it in the 1950s, but that world has been nuked, and it's a hundred years after that." Imagine the unlikely mix of optimism and paranoia that characterized the '50s, frozen in time by a civilization-crippling nuclear war. Bulbous-headed robots and nuclear-powered cars exist alongside vacuum-tube radios and war-bonds posters. Now imagine groups of survivors living in town-sized fallout shelters called vaults, with little or no contact with the outside world. It's a complex, fascinating premise, and unquestionably one of the primary reasons the series has drawn in so many fans, most especially thanks to the designers' commitment to this retro-futuristic theme in every aspect of the game's story, setting, and interface.

Aside from these fundamental ideas of setting and tone, plenty of specifics in *Fallout 3* remain faithful to the original games. The game begins 30 years after the events of *Fallout 2* in Vault 101, which sits amid the radioactive wasteland surrounding Washington, D.C. The important point here is that no one ever leaves Vault 101. *Ever*. You're born there and you die there. Except, one morning during your 19th year, you wake up to find that your father (voiced by Liam Neeson) has left the vault. Now you need to find out why—a quest that takes you out of the vault after him, and leads to the primary story of the game.

Other familiar elements include creatures (such as deathclaws, radscorpions, and two-headed cows), perks (unique bonus abilities earned as you level up), the SPECIAL stat system (strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck), and the Pip-Boy (model 3000!) personal management system, which tracks stats, inventory, weaponry, and so on.

THE OBLIVION FACTOR

But of course, this is no simple retread of the earlier games. For example, the D.C. setting allows for a striking variety of new locations and characters, from wasteland shantytowns to the bombed-out monuments of the capital, linked together by one vast subway system that presents its own unique challenges. And gone is the venerable isometric viewpoint, replaced by a first-person view that permits meticulous exploration of the game's striking retro-futuristic technology. (In addition, a fully customizable third-person view can shift from a close-up, over-the-shoulder setting to a much more distant overhead perspective evoking the original games.)

Comparisons to Bethesda's blockbuster *Oblivion* are inevitable—and not entirely unfounded. *Fallout 3* does use a modified version of the *Oblivion* engine; it does share the first-person perspective; it does feature a wide-open world that you're free to explore at your own pace. But don't make the mistake of thinking this is just *Oblivion* in the future, with guns and radiation and two-headed cows. *Fallout 3* looks to be a dramatically more focused experience, turning *Oblivion's* staggering breadth on edge; in other words, expect this game to be deeper than it is wide, and, in its targeted 40 hours of play, far more focused than Bethesda's previous efforts. >

COMPARISONS TO BETHESDA'S BLOCKBUSTER *OBLIVION* ARE INEVITABLE—AND, TO BE FAIR, NOT ENTIRELY UNFOUNDED.

• The model 3000 Pip-Boy personal management system tracks stats, inventory, and so on.

This is due in part to a much narrower cast of characters. "*Oblivion* has 1,500 NPCs," says Howard. "With *Fallout* we're dealing with a few hundred, which makes it much easier to construct those characters and how they're going to behave. It's not just people walking around, eating or sleeping, or things that you don't see [anymore]; we found lots of good ways to get [unique] behaviors all onscreen. Plus, the conversation system—what they do and what they say—is very unique, for almost every character. So, focusing on characters is a very big priority to us." This means that you won't run into anything like those awkward moments in *Oblivion*, where you overhear a husband and wife discussing the burgeoning population of mudcrabs with bizarre formality. Character models vastly improved from those of *Oblivion* complement the conversation system. Gone are the blotchy, vaguely reptilian features; characters in *Fallout 3* are dramatically more lifelike in appearance and animation.

LIVE FREE OR DIE

Bethesda's dedication to a greater degree of moral freedom for the player complements the complexity of its NPCs. "We're supporting choices for good and evil," says lead designer Emil Pagliarulo (the man responsible for *Oblivion*'s Dark Brotherhood quest line), "but we're also taking pains to support choices for the neutral, making sure those are valid character choices and that you can play in that gray area, where you're not the knight in shining armor or the really evil bastard—you're somewhere in between, with all the moral ambiguity that comes with that."

This concept of true moral choice permeates every aspect of the game, Howard contends. "With each character, I can be a dick, or I can be a good guy," he says. "We try to treat every character in the game that way. The whole game is: How do you want to role-play? What kind of character do you want to be?" While you won't break the game by pissing off the locals, you can miss out on certain storylines—and, presumably, your behavior toward NPCs will affect which of the game's multiple endings you'll achieve. (The designers hint at nine to 12 possible endings.)

The hard choices begin at the moment of birth. "We were very interested in this idea from the first game," Howard says, "where they say, 'You've lived your whole life in the vault,' and then they kick you out. Well, let's do that. Let's make the player feel like he's lived his whole life in the vault. So the game actually starts when you're a baby, and flashes through various periods of your life in the vault." You'll jump through the 19 years of your life in the vault, witnessing significant events like your 10th birthday (when you receive your own Pip-Boy), your 16th year (when you take the generalized occupational aptitude test, or GOAT, which helps determine your in-game skills), and of course the inexplicable departure of your father—whose physical appearance, incidentally, is dynamically generated based on the appearance of your own created character.

WAR CHANGES

This depth extends to the complex combat system, which riffs off that of the previous games by allowing you to target specific areas of your enemy's body in order to achieve specific goals: slowing your enemy by aiming for its legs, for example, or disarming it by aiming for its weapon. Tap a button and your viewpoint zooms in on the enemy, showing relative health of each segment as well as your chances of hitting it.

YOUR WEAPON IS ALMOST A SEPARATE CHARACTER WITH ITS OWN HIT POINTS AND CUSTOMIZABLE OPTIONS.

with the amount of information governed by your perception statistic.

Your choice of weapon affects these stats. In fact, your weapon is almost a separate character, with its own hit points and customizable options. A weapon in poor shape will fire less quickly, spray shots more widely, and jam more often—problems that you can counteract by scavenging parts from similar weapons. Going a step further, Bethesda also reveals that you'll be able to build your own weapons, though the designers declined to go into detail at this stage.

But don't make the mistake of thinking combat in *Fallout 3* is a run-and-gun affair. By zooming in on target areas, you can queue up attacks like in a turn-based RPG, choosing between sensitive areas that are harder to hit or easy targets that might not incapacitate your enemy as quickly. You don't *have* to use this "action point" system, but even if you're fighting in real time, the system will select targets and hit percentages based on your character's and weapon's stats—not on the speed of your trigger finger. "We don't necessarily want to reward twitch play," explains Howard. "We want to reward roleplaying your character well."

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Fallout 3's diverse moral choices and variety of possible endings should encourage multiple playthroughs. For example: In the demo we witnessed, Howard exited the vault and came upon a city built around an ostensibly inert nuclear bomb. He visited a saloon where a shady character hired him to detonate the bomb. Later, we watched the entire city vaporized—in real time—from a safe distance. But the player could just as easily have reported the shady character to the local sheriff, defused the bomb permanently, and become a hero to the townsfolk. You'll also encounter a multitude of less earthshaking choices, including the option to hire mercenaries to back you up in your trips across the wasteland, a much-acclaimed feature of the first two games (though this time you can expect less control over your hired help's behavior than *Fallout 2* offered).

Taking on the stewardship of a classic franchise is a weighty task, made even more difficult by the poor reception of the two most recent titles in the series. *Fallout* fans have been hoping for a satisfying sequel for nearly a decade now and have found little but disappointment. "People really like [*Fallout*]," Howard says, "and they've had a lot of folks telling them, 'Here's the next game in the franchise, and you're going to love it.' And the last two [games] don't have the heart of the series in mind. At the end of the day, I think they just want us to treat [the series] with respect, to take it seriously, because they take it seriously. And we do, too." • **Joe Rybicki**

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL FMV ACTOR

Are 3D graphics putting bad actors out of work?

INTERVIEW

Roger Action is an actor who made a career out of starring in full-motion video (FMV) titles. These games were a combination of recorded movies and gamelike interaction that had limited success in the '90s not only on PCs but also on consoles and in arcades. Roger has made it his goal to keep this struggling genre alive, and he joined us for this rare interview.

GFW: Tell us about what you're doing to help FMV games, Mr. Action.
ROGER ACTION: I started a nonprofit organization to help support FMV actors. I called it K.A.B.L.A.A.M., which I plan on making into an acronym as soon as I can come up with cool words that start with those letters. Basically, what we do is encourage companies to hire and provide benefits for FMV actors and actresses in their games, as opposed to robots or graphics and whatnot. With your help, we can make sure the next *Corpse Killer* or the next *Pit-Fighter* comes to be.

GFW: Aren't you worried that 3D modeling and rag-doll physics have made your industry obsolete?
RA: Can rag-doll physics appear, as if from nowhere, right in your face with a pipe wrench? Can rag-doll physics drive their kids to soccer practice and still make it to the photo studio in time to film themselves dying up to one dozen different ways? I tell you what—if a 3D model were here right now, we'd see how well polygons stand up against an orange belt in Shorin-ryu karate! Cho!

GFW: For readers unfamiliar with your work, what are some of the highlights of your FMV career?
RA: I got my start as the second assistant caterer in Sierra's *Phantasmagoria*, and I parlayed that into a role as a space pirate in *Space Pirates*. Later in my career, I won two Daytime FMV Awards for my work as a forklift driver in *Crime Patrol* and as Gallagher's stunt double in *Gallagher's Gallery*, both by American Laser Games. Did you hear that? American Laser Games!

GFW: Some say the FMV genre has been dead for over 10 years. Others say, "Those five or six games count as a genre?" How do you respond to those critics?
RA: Maybe you're not listening. It really said that on my paycheck: American Laser Games! Until Hulk Hogan starts a videogame studio called Me Riding a F***ing Bear, that will be the toughest name for a game company ever. Hold on...note to self: Start production on *Rocky III* hologram adventure game starring the film's actors set in the time of Dracula. OK, where were we? Oh, yes, I was talking about how I went to somersault school with three of the stuntmen from *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery*.

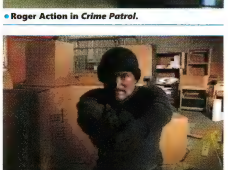
Roger Action also hosts (and is a contestant on) his own YouTube-based videogame quiz show.

GFW: Is it difficult work, acting for cutscenes and digitized action sequences?
RA: "Difficult"? Try "the most difficult." For example, there was a light-gun shooter where I had the role of a man jumping in front of the camera screaming, "Don't—ARRGGHHHH!" During production, I had to go *back in* and film a second take for when the player doesn't actually shoot me. In this one, I had to read the line in full: "Don't shoot! I'm just a guy leaping at you during a gunfight!" Do you think a rag-doll physics can convey the emotional depth of a line like that? No, because a rag-doll physics doesn't know it's going to die!

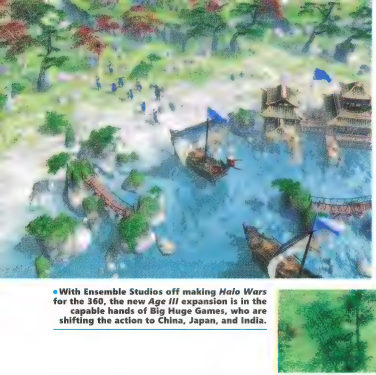
GFW: I'm glad you brought that particular role up. A lot of the characters you play are noncombatants leaping into a shooter's line of fire. Are you worried about being typecast?
RA: When you've seen what I've seen, you only worry about one thing in life: men disguised as women. So the long answer is "no." I think I bring something unique to each performance, even impossibly stupid target-recognition challenges. For example, when I'm portraying an innocent warehouse employee who jumps in front of the player's gun, I try to die with regret in my eyes, yet with the essence of grim acceptance. As opposed to when I play the part of a masked robber, where I try to die to the left. My goal is to one day have a classical-theater background.

GFW: How can people at home get involved in your cause?
RA: Boycott any products that don't feature digitized actors. This includes games, films, yogurts, and magazines. Send a message that videogames about the hit comedian Gallagher don't have to be a thing of the past. Remember *Sewer Shark?* Don't let our children grow up without a *Sewer Shark* of their own. **Seanbaby**

Roger Action in *Crime Patrol*.



Roger Action in *Crime Patrol*, too.



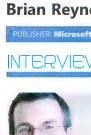
With Ensemble Studios off making *Halo Wars* for the 360, the new *Age III* expansion is in the capable hands of Big Huge Games, who are shifting the action to China, Japan, and India.

AGE OF EMPIRES III HEADS EAST

Brian Reynolds and Big Huge Games take on a big, huge franchise

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft Game Studios** DEVELOPER: **Big Huge Games** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2007**

INTERVIEW



While it's no big surprise that another *Age of Empires III* expansion is on the way—2 million copies sold guarantees franchise longevity—the recently announced *Asian Dynasties* expansion did throw us for a couple of loops. The first is that, for the first time in the franchise's history, Ensemble Studios isn't developing the game (they're too busy betraying us with *Halo Wars* for the Xbox 360). Instead, they've turned over the reins to Big Huge Games, makers of the *Rise of Nations* games and *Catan* for Xbox Live Arcade. The second surprise is that while both the original *Age of Empires III* and the first expansion were set in the New World, the new game, as the title makes clear, shifts the action way over to Asia, trading the Native American civs for three new ones: Japan, China, and India.

We caught up with Big Huge Games' head honcho Brain Reynolds to pick his brain.

GFW: How much of the design in *Asian Dynasties* is yours, and how much—if anything—is being supplied by Ensemble? Do you have freedom to do what you want and veer away from core gameplay?
BR: For us, it's kind of like getting to be the "special guest director" on an episode of our favorite TV show. We've tried to give the game our own unique "Big Huge Games" spin while at the same time staying true to the spirit of the original game and the *Age of Empires* franchise. Obviously, Ensemble has been very kind to let us play in their sandbox, so we don't want to let them down. Occasionally, something comes up where there's a question, like "does this fit with the *Age* universe?" and we all discuss it together. Really, though, both sides have pretty much been in agreement about where we want this expansion to go all along.

GFW: How satisfying is it, though, really, to work on a game that is based on someone else's rules and gameplay? As opposed to developing your own game from scratch?
BR: It's actually fun and refreshing and educational. When you use someone else's tools, you get a perspective on the way they chose to solve particular problems, and sometimes that's completely different from the way you're used to solving it.

GFW: OK, well, *Asian Dynasties*? WTF? *Age of Empires III* has been set in the New World—how is the campaign going to present the move East? And what happens to all the Native American units?
BR: Age of Discovery, baby! Where were the Europeans sailing to when they weren't headed to the New World?

GFW: We flunked history.
BR: The Far East! Where did Columbus want to go when he accidentally found the New World?

GFW: Disneyland?
BR: China! So all of our new maps represent parts of eastern and southern Asia—Honshu, the Silk Road, Indochina. You've got the Europeans arriving in Asia, bringing both opportunity and conflict, and you've got rivalry between the Asian powers themselves. Most of the single-player campaign takes place in Asia as well, though Gavin Menzies [author of *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*] fans will be happy to know we have a brief nod to the idea of a Ming treasure ship finding the New World.

GFW: What is Big Huge Games bringing to the series as far as gameplay innovation goes?
BR: Well, first of all, several classic *Age of Empires II* features are "returning in style," including Wonders. All three Asian civilizations build unique Wonders whenever they want to "age up." Each Wonder provides a lasting benefit or ability in addition to a one-time bonus. We've also introduced a new Asian building called the Consulate, which represents the opportunity to ally with one of the European powers. The Asian nations had silk, spice, and tea that the Europeans desperately wanted, so we allow Asian civilizations to exchange these exports for European units and technologies. Each Asian civilization can ally with certain European nations, and Japan has a unique "isolation" option. Finally, there are lots of little features such as [the] Japanese Daimyo, [which is] perhaps the most strategically powerful unit ever introduced into the game system, the Chinese Banner Armies, and some new random map mechanics, which we can't spill yet.

GFW: One cynical Internet whiner recently said something like this: "Wow, how did Big Huge Games go from being the maker of awesome original PC games to making console ports and expansions for other people's games?"
BR: Ah, the good old Internet. Actually, as most of our fans *are* probably aware, we are developing a major new PC game of our own, the RPG that we've recently announced with THQ. Doing the *Age* expansion made a lot of sense for us as a shorter project our RTS team could work on while we got the big RPG project underway. Similarly, I thought of *Catan* as a great chance to get our engine ported to consoles, not to mention the fact that *Settlers of Catan* is *the* best-selling Eurogame of all time and we felt like we had a chance to create the best board-game port "EVAR"—as they say on the Internet. ●**Jeff Green**

Humans: "WTF?"
Hierarchy: "PWNED!"

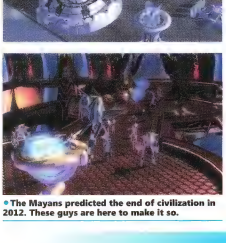
The Hierarchy is a fully mobile faction, which means you'll get to tell your friends "my base totally kicked your ass" after your base totally kicks their ass.

UNIVERSE AT WAR: EARTH ASSAULT

Hands-on with all three factions in Petroglyph's next RTS

PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Petroglyph Games GENRE: Real-Time Strategy RELEASE DATE: Fall 2007

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW



• The Mayans predicted the end of civilization in 2012. These guys are here to make it so.

With *StarCraft II* fever sweeping the PC gaming world, it's easy to forget some of the other big real-time strategy titles on the horizon. And while Blizzard's seemingly adopting a "don't break what already works" mentality with its 800-pound RTS gorilla, developer Petroglyph Games (the team of Westwood Studios castoffs that brought us last year's *Star Wars: Empire at War*) is taking some liberties with sophomore strategy effort *Universe at War: Earth Assault* that make even Blizzard's new toy look a bit tame by comparison.

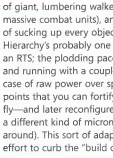
As we discussed in our last preview of *UAW* (*GFW* #5, pg. 18), the game's "Conquer the World" multiplayer mode consists of more than just picking a map and hitting "start"; it records your progress as you occupy territories that surround the globe, while a matchmaking service pits you against other players in control of areas that coincide with your own world-domination agenda. Leaderboards track individual players' victories and defeats, and skillful play awards bonuses that are used to bolster your online army.

UAW will also be one of the first—if not *the* first—third-party games to support Microsoft's Games for Windows Live. This, of course, means the standard Achievements and voice chat, in addition to cross-platform play between PC and Xbox 360 users (once the console version's done, in any case—Petroglyph asserts that the PC version's the top priority). It's unclear what sorts of advantages and disadvantages either platform might have over the other; we're speculating that PC hotkey masters will wind up with the upper hand online.

It *is* clear, however, that the PC version plays quite unlike a conventional RTS. We recently took *UAW* for a spin (in both single-player and multiplayer modes), and the game's three factions—the Masari (revealed for the first time here), the Hierarchy, and the Novus—exhibit profound levels of diversity that rival those of *StarCraft* and *Rise of Legends*. Here's a peek at each side's history, tech trees, and modus operandi.

THE FACTIONS

THE HIERARCHY



BACKGROUND

Malevolent and conquest-hungry, the Hierarchy personifies every alien-invasion fear you've ever had. Cruising from world to world, these extraterrestrial conquerors steamroll over everything in their path and enslave whatever survives. The Hierarchy arrives on Earth in the year 2012 (not-so-coincidentally the same year that the Mayan calendar predicts the end of civilization as we know it), and the single-player campaign begins just three days into the incursion.

PLAY STYLE

The Hierarchy's an entirely mobile faction. Production facilities take the form of giant, lumbering walkers that clomp across the battlefield (and double as massive combat units), and the faction's resource-gathering model consists of sucking up every object in sight—living or otherwise. In practice, the Hierarchy's probably one of the most unconventional armies we've seen in an RTS; the plodding pace makes for a slow start, but once your army's up and running with a couple of walkers spitting out infantry units, it's a clear case of raw power over speed. Each walker features a number of armor hard points that you can fortify with offensive and defensive upgrades on the fly—and later reconfigure once you figure out your opponent's plan (it's a different kind of micromanagement that you'll have to wrap your head around). This sort of adaptive strategy is core to *UAW*'s design and is an effort to curb the "build order syndrome" that typifies most online RTSes.

TECH TREES

Each faction enjoys access to three tech trees apiece—think of them like *World of WarCraft* talent trees in that you may spend points to climb any combination of the three trees and change your allocations later as the situation demands. The Hierarchy's Mutagen tree augments radioactive attacks, which infect the Earth's population (and enemy units), allowing the Hierarchy the possibility of controlling them; the Quantum tree gives access to fancy future tech like phasing and armor upgrades; and the Assault tree makes your weapons of mass destruction even more massively destructive.

THE NOVUS

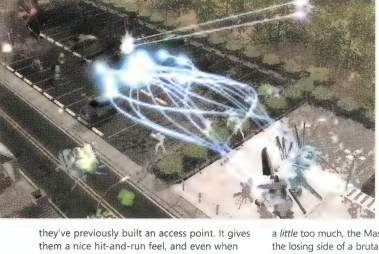
BACKGROUND

Victimized by the Hierarchy's oppression, this faction once saw humanoids and A.I. living together in harmony in a sort of bizarro *Matrix*. Once the Hierarchy put an end to that, the species' scarce remnants—all machines, save for a single humanoid survivor—rebuilt themselves, taking the name "Novus" (roughly translated as "the children of" in the faction's own language) and pursuing their assailants across the galaxy using wormhole technology in an effort to sabotage subsequent war efforts. Now the Hierarchy's landed on Earth—and it's time to rumble.

PLAY STYLE

These space-age Internauts maintain a more traditional base infrastructure than the Hierarchy, with central energy generators and "power tower" extensions fueling their production facilities (for resources, the Novus harvest scrap metal from surrounding environments and fallen enemy units). In a sort of mirror image of the Hierarchy, the Novus trade durability for speed, as their energy grid forms a connected network that they can use to "flow" seamlessly across the map, to and from any location where >

Masari architects will buildings into existence and maintain them with nothing but the awesome power of their *minds*!



The Masari's units and backstory are steeped in popular mythology. Are they Atlanteans? Pharaohs? Angels? Who knows?

they've previously built an access point. It gives them a nice hit-and-run feel, and even when you direct a group of units to a distant point on the field, they attempt to intelligently utilize network nodes to travel the quickest route possible. The Novus adapt to various situations via patches; you can plug up to two of these into your army at any given time, bestowing abilities that range from quicker resource collecting to stealth-detection capabilities.

TECH TREES

The Novus' Computing tech tree magnifies the power of their viruses, allowing them to spread their virtual illnesses more quickly and completely shut down infected enemy units. Nanotech's a defensive tree, imparting structural reinforcements and other powers like stealth camouflage, and the Signal tree basically increases the Novus' network bandwidth, allowing units to flow faster and farther across the map.

THE MASARI

BACKGROUND

This highly advanced spacefaring species once sought to help a dying race that possessed (in the Masari's eyes) great potential. Unfortunately, after rescuing these would-be victims from their decaying world and teaching them just a *little* too much, the Masari found themselves on the losing side of a brutal war against their one-time wards. Left for dead, the crew of the Masari's single surviving ship made their way to the primitive planet Earth (thanks to a bit of experimental tech), where they slumbered beneath the ocean, slowly working to restore their race while subtly shaping the course of Earth's history (appearances suggest that the Masari had a hand in everything from the pyramids to the fabled Atlantis). Now, centuries later, the reinforced Masari awaken to find their genocidal nemesis—now known as the Hierarchy—at the proverbial doors of their adopted home.

PLAY STYLE

The Masari are aces at manipulating matter, and the Masari architect units—central to the faction's entire strategy—essentially spawn new buildings into existence through sheer will and act as permanent power/efficiency amplifiers for specific buildings if you order them to do so. Reactor structures convert atmospheric energy into consumable resources (meaning no dirt farming of any kind for the Masari), and as an added bonus, these reactors are extremely volatile—build 'em near an enemy base and, if the other guy's dumb enough to tear one down, the whole area goes boom.

The central tenet behind the Masari's warfare efforts is a pair of stances that amount to two very different play styles. In the default Light mode, the Masari maintain air superiority (downed aerial units can rebuild for free, provided your pilots survive the attack) and excel at ranged combat, with high-damage units and weak buildings. Click the Dark button, though, and all of your structures are slowly reinforced by "dark armor," your aerial units transform into ground units, and your army trades ranged superiority for hand-to-hand dominance. Stance changes come with both warm-up and cooldown phases, but the turnabout happens quickly enough to encourage adaptive use. Overall, the stance mechanic makes the Masari feel like the easiest faction for the average RTS player to understand and use effectively right from the get-go. Oh, and avoid midrange battles—they're the Masari's Achilles' heel.

TECH TREES

The Light and Dark tech trees boost their associated combat stances; Light focuses heavily on long-range firepower and gives doomed aerial units the resurrection powers of the legendary phoenix, while Dark adds extra defense, healing abilities, and the power to cleanse negative effects (like the Hierarchy's radiation poisoning and the Novus' pesky viral attacks). The Masari's third tech tree, Balance, blends facets of the Light and Dark stances, offering cloaking, stealth detection, unit regeneration, and resource-accumulation bonuses. Like the Mayan doomsday tie-in, that yin-yang symbolism's no happenstance, either. These otherworldly armies are gearing up for a war of mythical—even *apocalyptic*—proportions. • **Ryan Scott**

THE MASARI EMPLOY A PAIR OF STANCES THAT AMOUNT TO TWO VERY DIFFERENT PLAY STYLES.

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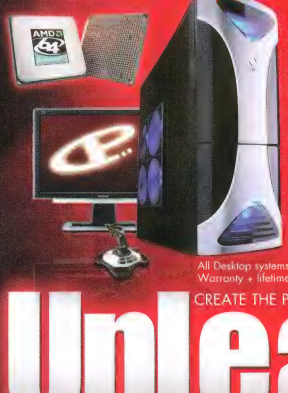

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LINE

How Eastern Europe,

PROFILE

Boštjan Čadež, a Slovenian industrial design student, wrote *Line Rider* on a whim. "It was more an accident [than] anything else," says "Bosh," as he prefers to be called. "I just like programming, and it seemed a nice idea." Like most kids, Čadež was a doodler growing up. He'd sit in class, bored—"I'm not a very good student," he admits—and construct elaborate hills and jumps on his sketchpad, then trace the path of an imaginary rider (the "Dude" in *Line Rider*-speak) sliding and flipping down the page. "Then it hit me. If it was fun to just imagine, how fun would it be to watch it live?"

So he started coding up a virtual sketchpad in Flash—little more than a pencil, a line tool, and a "play" button. At first, it was an exercise in frustration. "I knew it needed physics to be interesting," recalls Čadež. But he was an art student, not a physics major. So in the time-honored tradition of artists throughout history, he looked for something to copy. He found it in an article on simplified physics at Gamasutra.com, a website that focuses on the developer side of the industry. "The person who wrote the article explained everything with pseudo-code—really simple code," he explains. "When I found it, I was thrilled!"

Armed with physics code, he added the sledder to the drawing tools, and *Line Rider* was born. In September 2006, thinking nothing much of it, he posted the program to deviantART.com, a virtual museum for budding artists. Čadež didn't even think of it as a game. "I think the way I [saw] it, it was a kind of new medium," says Čadež, "something between a comic, a cartoon, and a game." In the end, he just called it a toy.

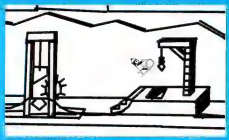
By October 2006, *Line Rider* had become an Internet phenomenon, hopping from blog post to e-mail to IM, as all Flash-based time-wasters seem to do. Suddenly, 10,000 people were pulling down the game on any given day. And people started posting their best tracks as videos on YouTube—the nerd equivalent of skateboard footage.

THE EVANGELIST

Five thousand miles away, Matthew Nelson discovered *Line Rider* in his Minnesota home when his 9-year-old son said, "Hey, Dad—check this out!" Eager for anything to connect him and his children, he started dabbling, sharing tracks and ideas with his son. "I crashed the little Dude over and over again," Nelson says. So he started

LINE RIDER'S GREATEST HITS

"DISCARDED" by TechDawg
A poignant tale of the Dude having a bad day.



"CRAZY CASTLE RUN" by bananafc
A guided tour of the Dude's house.

"SUPER MARIO" by shadowinja
Super Mario Bros. World 1-1. Seriously.

RIDER

the Midwest, and Orange County came together over a little dude on a sled

poking around the Internet for advice and tips. "I found all the videos others had done," he says. By winter 2006, those videos already numbered in the thousands. "I felt challenged," he recalls. For Nelson, soon to be "TechDawg" to the *Line Rider* faithful, a gauntlet had been thrown down.

Nelson, already a frustrated artist, decided to take this simple little toy and see how far he could push it. He started constructing incredibly elaborate tracks for the sledder, courses that were themselves works of virtual pen-and-ink art. "When combined with the right music and presented in the right way, a *Line Rider* track becomes more than just a set of lines and a little sledder," Nelson says. "It becomes a story, a world that you can enter, suspend your disbelief for a few moments." The results of Nelson's efforts are stunning, leaving the uninitiated slack-jawed at the complexity and timing of his creations.

"TechDawg" became the de facto leader of the *Line Rider* community, hosting forums, tutorials, and movies at RidetheLines.com. Along the way, he and Čadež got to know each other, with Nelson serving as Čadež's unofficial one-man beta-test team and chief evangelist.

In December 2006, Brian Fargo, CEO of Newport Beach, CA-based inXile entertainment, discovered *Line Rider* and immediately saw the potential in Čadež's baby. "I contacted him right away and requested his phone number," recalls Fargo. "He finally e-mailed me back and told me he doesn't have a phone where he is in Slovenia." This was not the interaction Fargo expected. "So first, I looked up on the Internet where Slovenia is...."

Eventually, entirely by instant message and e-mail, Fargo and Čadež negotiated a deal. Fargo (no stranger to making deals—he started publisher/developer Interplay back in 1983) wasn't looking to get into the "small game" or "casual" part of the gaming market, but he admits that "smaller games do allow for more creative risk, which reminds me of the good ol' days."

Deal done, inXile immediately started developing an expanded version of *Line Rider* for Nintendo's Wii and DS consoles. inXile immediately realized the value in Nelson's contributions. Both Čadež and Nelson are now working on the new games, which will take the simple idea far beyond the Flash toy you can play on the Web, adding levels, puzzles, challenges, and a storyline that reveals why the little Dude is on the sled in the first place.

▪ *Line Rider* began on industrial design student Boštjan Čadež's sketchpad (shown above right).

Čadež has gone from doodling in class to designing console videogames in six months. He still doesn't own a phone, and he lives with his mom.

Nelson, a father of four from Minnesota, has gone from designing photo IDs for beauty schools to having his name on a game his kids will want to play with their friends.

And Fargo? Fargo's going to take them both down the slippery, twisting path of commercial game development.

All three of them have stepped out of their element. Three "dudes," separated by thousands of miles, all heading down the same track.

It's sure to be a wild ride.

▪ **Julian Murdoch**

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"JAGGED PEAK ADVENTURE" by unconed
An early and influential tour of Dudeland.

"ONE EYED GIANT" by skateżskamusic
The Dude zips across a giant's banquet table.

• Co-op, yes. Competitive multiplayer, no. "We had to pick our battles," says lead designer Scott Warner.

RECRUIT NPCS INTO YOUR OWN PRIVATE BLACKWATER TO RUN THE OPERATION AND DELIVER GEAR FROM YOUR STASH TO THE FIELD

• Commandeering vehicles starts a minigame. Succeed, and the vehicle's yours. Fail, and fall down to the ground.

MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES

Two for the price of one

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **Pandemic Studios** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **November**

Your hirelings don't hang out by your side on the field but rather deliver specialized goods and services from your HQ when you call on them.

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

"Sandbox" is becoming a dirty word, overused to describe any game where you can knock over barrels and push NPCs off their rails *anywhere in the world, anytime you want*. Execute properly and you get *Grand Theft Auto*. Implement poorly and stacking rag-doll corpses onto staircases turns out to be more fun than your game proper. Freedom isn't free—even in game design.

So when you hear *Mercenaries 2: World in Flames* is a sandbox, we understand if you want to mix in a grain of salt. The basic structure isn't too far removed from its Xbox and PlayStation 2 progenitor: You're a modern-day gun for hire, selling your services to whichever of the game's factions you wish, earning cash for taking out targets, and completing morally murky contracts at your own discretion. Only now, developer Pandemic puts a toy box next to the sandbox.

"One fundamental change in the game structure this time around is the addition of your PMC [private military company] headquarters," says lead designer Scott Warner, "which allows you to store support items you purchase from contacts you meet throughout the game and store resources—fuel, vehicles, weapons, and airstrikes—you find and extract in the world." Walk from one end of *Mercs 2*'s virtual Venezuela to the other if you want to—why not?—but Warner would rather have you airlift in that tank you stole from the Universal Petroleum operatives, hop in and blow your way through the jungle, call in an airstrike to help take out that irritating blockade in your path, and boatjack an Omen patrol vessel to take you to the finish line. (The toy chest includes 130 vehicles, from garbage trucks and motorcycles to gunships and bombers, which you can steal from rivals or purchase from friendly factions.) Recruit NPCs into your own private Blackwater to run the operation and deliver gear from your stash, ill-gotten or otherwise, to the field.

PLAY NICE NOW

Mercs 2 welcomes a second kid to the sandbox, too, with a new join-anytime co-op mode so you and a friend can knock down castles and fight over plastic fire trucks together; luckily, a good number of those trucks have multiple gun turrets mounted on the roof. Balancing gameplay in such an environment isn't so much difficult as it is futile—in a system that's already so much chaos theory, what's another butterfly flapping its wings?

"Since *Mercs* is deeply nonlinear, we already design our missions such that the multiangled approach is accounted for," says Warner. "In some ways, our game has *always* been designed with co-op in mind. That said, we devote a chunk of each designer's daily routine to running through their missions, making sure everything they're doing for the single-player experience translates into an entertaining co-op experience as well. We're really not fans of adjusting the player's fundamental experience. [So we're not] changing his understanding of how many shots it takes to kill something, spawning in more enemies to account for the presence of a second player, et cetera."

One possible outcome (out of many): Objectives occur in tandem instead of succession. Warner cites an example involving one of *Mercs 2*'s showpiece missions, the destruction of an oil rig in the sea surrounding Venezuela—after the player takes care of business on top of the platform first. "In a single-player campaign, the player would have to choose between the air and water approaches to the rig, complete the objective on top of the rig, and then fight his way off it before planning the destruction phase. In co-op, one player could get to the top of the oil rig while the other carefully plants C4 charges on the support pillars below. Instead of fighting his way off, the player on top of the oil rig could run for his life and jump off the rig just as the other player was detonating the charges."

Players can share weapons and ammo, of course—but parity breaks down once the PMC comes into play. "Player one will progress through his game earning the money, items, and progression," says Warner. "Player two will be able to use any of player one's resources at anytime but will not be able to take any of it back with him to his other campaigns." A mercenary hired by a mercenary—the sandbox goes deep. Or maybe I'm just overcomplicating a G.I. Joe collection and summer in your parents' backyard. **Sean Molloy**

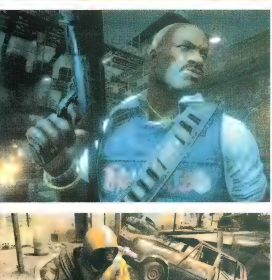
While Bizarre likes to draw comparisons between *The Club* and its Project Gotham Racing series, it also has a heavy dose of high-score obsession, courtesy of the studio's blast-like Arcade shooter *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*.

Says Matt Cavanagh, lead designer: "*The Club* is about perfecting your run through a level and changing the way you play."

THE CLUB

Genre-bending with abandon

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Bizarre Creations** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2007**



•*The Club* may have as much in common with *Pac-Man* as it does with your typical shooter.

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

If you've already grown tired of schizophrenic genre mashups in millennial music, from synthesizer-tinged country to sample-based rock 'n' roll, you might want to steer clear of games for the next few years. In the absence of revolutionary new ideas, developers are focusing on blurring the boundaries between established genres, creating surprising hybrids out of familiar concepts. Get used to hearing things like this: "*The Club* is a shooting game with a racing mentality." That's Matt Cavanagh, lead designer of *The Club*, a prime example of the mashup school of game design. With *The Club*, Cavanagh's team at Liverpool-based Bizarre Creations wants to cook up the gaming equivalent of wasabi peanuts—an unconventional but tasty flavor combination.

Let's run down a list of *The Club*'s ingredients. You've got your third-person shooter (the dominant flavor), your fighting game (eight characters from different backgrounds and countries in a tournament), your racing game (levels in *The Club* are designed more like racetracks than battlefields), your '80s arcade game (high scores are everything), and your light-gun game (enemies act more like the rock police in Aerosmith's *Revolution X* than the A.I. opponents in modern shooters). If that sounds indigestible, Bizarre's official recipe is simpler: shooter + racer = *The Club*.

"I know that may sound weird," says Cavanagh, "but think of it like this: Every enemy in *The Club* is a corner. How you take down those enemies is the same as how you take corners in a racing game." Bizarre certainly knows racing; they're the brains behind the *Project Gotham Racing* series on the Xbox. But there would seem to be a great distance between racing cars around a track and shooting waves of contestants in an underground blood sport. "It's about killing as quickly and effectively as possible," says Cavanagh. "And it's about exploring the way in which you play the levels and honing your performance through them to attain the best score possible."

In a hands-off demo, the combination seems to click. We watch as Seager, a killer in dreadlocks and an orange tech vest, runs through a Russian steel mill in the game's time-attack mode. Just like the orange cone races in *PGR3*, time-attack mode in *The Club* is all about adding seconds to a timer that remains perpetually on the verge of running out. The only way to extend your time is to complete a small goal. In *PGR3*, that goal was to drive through the next set of cones. In *The Club*, you gain time every time you kill someone. This is where the jack-in-the-box-style enemies come in. It's not that Bizarre has tried to create believable enemy A.I. and failed—they want you to memorize enemy spawn points and behaviors.

"Indeed, this was a design decision," says producer Omar Woodley. "Very much like in racing games, you begin to learn the right angle to powerslide into turns or when to apply the foot brake instead of the hand brake. The courses and A.I. are meant to be memorized by the user, leaving less and less room for error. Eventually, the user becomes the best run-and-gun marksman ever."

"Run-and-gun" is the official *Club* catchphrase—a strange term to associate with your game, as it's often used to describe shooters that lack satisfying depth. But here the meaning is literal. Our murderer is sprinting through rusted corridors, nailing one meatbag after another, looping around the level like a race car running laps. The player obviously knows his stuff, anticipating the location of his victims before they arrive. He's building up combo points like a YouTube-worthy *Geometry Wars* run, searching out victims like Pac-Man chomping power pellets, and nailing trick shots (ricochet kills around corners) like special tricks in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. *The Club* is so full of influences and sampled ideas, it's like a Rorschach test for your gaming subconscious. **•Robert Ashley**

•*The Club* refers to a secret deathmatch tournament held for the gambling enjoyment of an elite group of wealthy patrons. Sounds like our public school system.

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The Freeloader

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"**Draw this turtle's ass** and you can be in art school!" You've seen those old ads in the back of comic books, right? Or maybe you got the matchbook that asked you to sketch a picture of Terry the Developmentally Challenged Pirate to "qualify" for some pay-by-mail illustration course. I took those lessons—all $300 worth of 'em. Did I care if my "higher education" amounted to a ream of tracing paper and a couple chewed-up No. 2 pencils? Hell no! I had a dream. I'd *make* something of myself. But by the time I showed up at a properly accredited art school, I realized two things: One, I have zero talent. Two....

"What does this have to do with free ga—"

Hey, don't interrupt me! Anyhow, I got these neighbors. Art students. They come in at all hours, making noise and drinking and smoking whatever's lying around. Then they start creating wacky stuff. My personal favorite? A top hat made out of ground beef. That's when I realized we shared a common goal: sponging off loved ones to keep doing what we truly love. Anything to stave off exposure to the "real world." Gotta respect that kind of dedication. For that alone, this month's column goes out to America's unsung heroes of moochery: the art students. What better way to do that than to scope out surreal games that make the stuff sitting on store shelves look stone-cold sober? So here's to you, Mister "I'm so emo, I want to cut myself and doodle on canvas with my blood."

• **The Freeloader**

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM

SEVERE
Game crashes (or doesn't work) in Vista.

ELEVATED
Some basic features don't function.

GUARDED
Minor bugs detected.

LOW
Works like a charm in Windows Vista!

XTRAS

FREE GAMES!

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THE GAME: **Crayon Physics** PREVIOUSLY: **Color Me Bad**

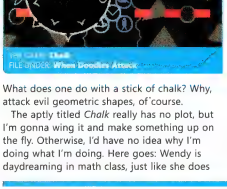
All great artists have to start somewhere. Picasso's first medium? Construction paper, paste, and safety scissors. And did you know DaVinci's mom stuck her son's fingerpaintings to the fridge door?

Crayon Physics is simple, fun, and a fine example of truth in advertising: It's a goofy physics game using crayons. You have a little red ball, and you need to figure out how to get it to the star somewhere else on the screen. Nothing fancy, right? Well, as you can see from the screenshot, it's all about the presentation. What really knocked me out is that the entire game looks like I shoved over some kindergartner, sat at his desk, and started hoarding his box of Crayolas.

Once you start drawing shapes with the mouse, the in-game physics take over and knock the ball around. It's not exactly a perfect implementation—a couple levels in, I was trying to draw a tiny rectangle and wound up with a planet-devouring square.

Hey, I already warned ya earlier—I have no artistic talent whatsoever.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW



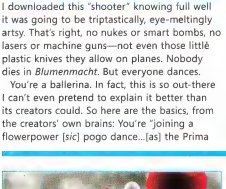
THE GAME: **Chalk**
FILE UNDER: **Where Doodlers Attack**

What does one do with a stick of chalk? Why, attack evil geometric shapes, of course.

The aptly titled *Chalk* really has no plot, but I'm gonna wing it and make something up on the fly. Otherwise, I'd have no idea why I'm doing what I'm doing. Here goes: Wendy is daydreaming in math class, just like she does every other day. But this time when she falls asleep, she finds herself trapped in a hallucinatory, mathematics-filled dreamland. Armed with nothing but the titular scholastic drawing implement, Wendy needs to fight her way out past the sinister polyhedron army and its sketchy sidekicks.

The cool part of the game is the simple style and how you wield your weapon of choice: You control your chalk just as if it were your mouse cursor. With it, you're drawing lines through enemies to cross them off your list of threats, creating line shields to block attacks, or grabbing enemies and redirecting their attacks back at 'em. Now all you need to do is draw your way to freedom!

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW



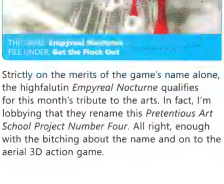
THE GAME: **Blumenmacht**
FILE UNDER: **Rainbow Brite's Acid Trip**

I downloaded this "shooter" knowing full well it was going to be triptastically, eye-meltingly artsy. That's right, no nukes or smart bombs, no lasers or machine guns—not even those littlé plastic knives they allow on planes. Nobody dies in *Blumenmacht*. But everyone dances.

You're a ballerina. In fact, this is so out-there I can't even pretend to explain it better than its creators could. So here are the basics, from the creators' own brains: You're "joining a flowerpower [*sic*] pogo dance...[as] the Prima Ballerina. To win a dance your Prima Ballerina has to throw flowers at the other Ballerinas until they are all happy. They try to do the same with your Prima Ballerina. But if they succeed and your Prima Ballerina is happy, you lose the dance. During a dance you can always choose which Ballerina should take the leading part of the Prima Ballerina. Throw blossoms at the muses and they will spend [*sic*] your Prima Ballerina talents."

So basically, you have to make other people happier than you make yourself. Who designed this game, my mom? As I played *Blumenmacht*, I found myself scratching my head on more than one occasion. As with most modern art, I had no idea what the hell was going on. All the colors, flower-powered "explosions," and onscreen chaos kept me from attaining my inner Prima Ballerina. But it sure was cool to look at for a while.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW



THE GAME: **Empyreal Nocturne**
FILE UNDER: **Get the Flock Out**

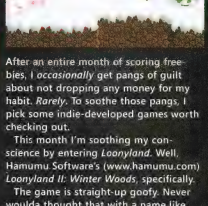
Strictly on the merits of the game's name alone, the highfalutin *Empyreal Nocturne* qualifies for this month's tribute to the arts. In fact, I'm lobbying that they rename this *Pretentious Art School Project Number Four*. All right, enough with the bitching about the name and on to the aerial 3D action game.

You are a good bird (or a bird god—don't ask me; I ain't no ornithologist) with the ability to command lesser birds. Get some to join your flock. Go out and rain poop down on your opponents. All right, the real goal is to zip around and combat enemy "birds." Wait. What? Birds? I'd crap myself where I stand if any of the geometric monsters I'm attacking resembled anything remotely avian. All right. Sorry about that. Where was I? Oh, right. When you reach the creatures that command enemy birds, sick your posse on the interconnected orbs, and eventually the wiry wildlife will drop like stones. Pay no mind to the fact that these shapes look more like sleek paper airplanes than birds—the game is damn fun.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!



After an entire month of scoring freebies, I *occasionally* get pangs of guilt about not dropping any money for my habit. *Rarely*. To soothe those pangs, I pick some indie-developed games worth checking out.

This month I'm soothing my conscience by entering *Loonyland*. Well, Hamumu Software's (www.hamumu.com) *Loonyland II: Winter Woods*, specifically.

The game is straight-up goofy. Never woulda thought that with a name like *Loonyland II*, I know...but let me explain. The game appears innocent enough with its cutesy Claymation-ish art style. With its little wooden soldiers trying to knock your lights out and wind-up mice that projectile vomit, you'd think it's a kids' game. The trick is that it also happens to be an action-RPG: You level up and acquire skills and do all the things one expects—though somebody somewhere was smoking *something* when designing this indie title. What would make me say such a thing?

Maybe it's the overly happy music. As you're hacking and slashing your way through this colorful world, this upbeat soundtrack—like something out of some psycho *Wonder Showzen*—loops in the background. Oddly out-of-place characters meet you along the way, including a "legitimate businessman" with an accent thicker than Tony Soprano's. In the same way that *SpongeBob SquarePants* seems aimed at stoners and schoolkids, I'd say that *Looneyland II: Winter Woods* might attract a similar crowd. And at 20 bucks, I'd say I got my money's worth.

• Though North America's scene is modest compared to what's happening overseas, triumph tastes no less sweet for the Fnatic Team (pictured here in December 2006 at the WSVG Finals in New York).

REMOTE

When it comes to gaming as a spectator sport, big names take a back

TRENDS

Sure, playing games grants us an escape from reality, an outlet for unresolved frustrations, and the opportunity to interact with people we wouldn't otherwise be able to. But an increasing number of professional gaming leagues are betting that we're just as keen on *watching* as playing.

The World Series of Video Games is forging a long-term partnership with mainstream broadcast giant CBS that will bring highlights from its numerous tournaments to TV audiences. By the same token, the broadcasting establishment spawned DirecTV's Championship Gaming Series with the intent of codifying the anarchic e-sports scene's rules and conventions. Meanwhile, the Cyberathlete Professional League—one of the market's most venerable names—seems mighty dismissive of the role that televised broadcast can play in this scene. Essentially, no consensus exists on how (or even if) competitive gaming broadcasts can tap into the American mainstream. Everyone just seems to hope that the essence of what draws us to play games will also make us want to watch them. But even the most seemingly obvious solutions can prove problematic.

World of WarCraft seems woefully unsuited to big-draw broadcasting, 8 million players worldwide be damned. Despite all the work that publisher Blizzard has done to make the game's characters an order of magnitude more physically expressive than anything the genre has seen, there's just too much information written into every second of gameplay for a casual audience to make heads or tails of it. "MMORPGs are particularly difficult to broadcast," says Jang Jae-Hyuk, production department director at MBC Game, one of South Korea's most prominent broadcasters in the competitive gaming field. "It's challenging for commentators to follow the progress, and it's hard for viewers to catch what skills competitors use in-game. And the matches are over so quickly." So what could explain the World Series of Video Games' decision to include the game in its tournaments? It comes down to numbers: *WOW* is a world-class brand with a huge global player base—and to the World Series of Video Games, CBS, and Blizzard, this means a sizable built-in audience. In the mind of Sam Lingle, editor-in-chief of competitive gaming portal Amped eSports, this is the most important piece of the puzzle: "One thing to note here is that, no matter how 'suitable' [for broadcast] a game might be, it won't be successful if it isn't a fun and popular title." By that reasoning, there's likely no game better positioned to push e-sports into the North American mainstream...provided Blizzard works to make its game more telegenic.

BROADCAST YOUR TRIUMPH

A hugely popular title, however, is only one component of this possible perfect storm. Depending on whom you talk to, leagues and broadcasters need to take cues from professional poker, the WWE, and...*Magic: The Gathering*? If you ask *Magic*-maker Wizards of the Coast's Randy Buehler, the answer is an unequivocal "yes." As vice president of digital gaming at Wizards of the Coast, Buehler is responsible for organizing *Magic*'s annual Pro Tour, which has drawn hundreds of thousands of participants from all around the world in the 11 years since its launch. *Magic* tournament broadcasts have amassed an immense following online, so much so that Wizards of the Coast parted ways with former broadcast partner ESPN five years ago and hasn't looked back. The possibility that competitive gaming can somehow mirror *Magic*'s trajectory calls the perceived need to ally with traditional broadcasters into question. "We've moved away from that because we're getting so much traffic to our website," Buehler says. "If I've got 100,000 people watching one of these broadcasts, it's starting to hit the point where it registers on the Nielsen radar. It's not clear that you have to go to broadcast to get [people] to watch these things."

By focusing on already enfranchised audiences—and serving them directly via outlets like YouTube

• South Korean pro gamers wield star power somewhere in between Daniel Radcliffe and Wil Wheaton.

• *Magic: The Gathering* Hall of Famer Raphael Levy smolders behind his assuredly loaded hand.

WOW SEEMS WOEFULLY UNSUITED TO BIG-DRAW BROADCASTING. 8 MILLION PLAYERS WORLDWIDE BE DAMNED.

VIEWING

seat to human drama

or spectator features implemented into the games themselves—aspiring broadcasters' need of mainstream support is diminished. However, according to Flagship Studios' Bill Roper—who, as a Blizzard alumnus, is no stranger to the scene—TV may be where the ultimate expression of this idea will live. "I believe that we're going to see strides made in games broadcasting online first. This would transition to live and time-delayed broadcast of events over the Internet and, potentially, television," Roper says. "Again, a key to this will be for TV to work *with* the gaming industry on finding the right games and the right ways to bring those games to audiences."

Angel Munoz, president of the Cyberathlete Professional League, isn't convinced he needs TV to maintain a healthy audience. "Beyond the fact that videogame competitions are simply not interesting to the average television viewer...2.5 million fewer people [are] watching ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox than at the same time last year," he says. "This gradual—but significant—transformation will make it even more difficult for videogame competitions to make it as traditional televised shows." Meanwhile, Matthew Ringel, Munoz's counterpart at the World Series of Video Games, thinks TV should play a role, if a secondary one: "We strongly believe that broadcast television is part of the mix, but only a part. Broadband video is the main driver—that's where the principal audience for this content lives. While we'll produce 20 hours of broadcast television in a given year, we'll do 250 hours of broadband."

"AN ACTOR IS AT MOST A POET AND AT LEAST AN ENTERTAINER."

Buehler freely admits that *Magic* is much more of a niche pursuit than, say, *Counter-Strike* or *WOW*, but he also feels the success of his formula has just as much to do with the personalities controlling the decks as with the game itself. "We spend a lot of time thinking about star-building," he says. "We know that the goal of the Pro Tour, from a cold marketing point of view, is to get people interested in the game, and we know that the way to do that is by getting them invested in the human drama." Jang agrees: "Most important of all is to foster star players—everybody wants to root for a hero."

While someone like *Unreal Tournament* and *Quake* champion Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel might beg to differ, Roper stresses that the U.S. has a way to go before pro gamers can comfortably occupy a spot in the limelight. "The professional gamers in countries like South Korea are stars. They gain sponsorships, are spokespeople for products, have fan clubs with hundreds of thousands of members," he says. "In the U.S., we're just starting to see parents who grew up playing videogames getting their kids into [them]. But for now, we're still fighting our whole 'geek' pigeonholing."

If Roper and company are right, then the key to competitive gaming's mainstream success may lie in larger-than-life personalities in the vein of professional wrestling. Now, there's no question that pro gamers can bring the smack talk when it comes to Internet forums. Thing is, when the cameras are pointed at their faces, will we want to look at them long enough to learn to lionize them?

The gaming industry is fraught with unfortunate examples of flubbed, mismanaged attempts at mainstream crossovers, and the e-sports scene could very well be the next victim of these ill-conceived methodologies. As we've seen, though, the industry has always been able to rebound from even the most blatant pandering. The grassroots communities that already care about competitive gaming are the e-sports scene's insurance policy, and they're the ones whose continued support will anchor it in the face of any potential murder-by-mishandling. Whether or not its flirtations with the broadcast establishment will pay off is anyone's guess, but one thing is certain—it wouldn't be wise to alienate the core audience. These gamers are the ones who the leagues can guarantee will continue to watch, regardless of whether the broadcasts air on MTV or SourceTV. • **Miguel Lopez**

THE GFW INTERVIEW: BRIAN FARGO

Living in the fallout BY [illegible]

1983
Brian Fargo forms Interplay Productions.

1985
***Tales of the Unknown Volume I: The Bard's Tale* becomes Interplay's first hit. Fargo made the maps for the first two *Bard's Tale* games and directed the third.**

1988
Produces post-nuclear role-playing game *Wasteland* (the spiritual dad of *Fallout*), which ships the same day as *The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight*.

1989-1996
Interplay breaks off from EA to become a game publisher and give breaks to little developers like Blizzard and BioWare.

1997
Interplay's Black Isle Studios division releases *Fallout*.

1998-2001
Interplay releases a string of classic RPGs like *Fallout 2*, the *Baldur's Gate* series, *Icewind Dale*, and *Planescape: Torment*.

2002
Fargo leaves Interplay and founds inXile Entertainment.

2003
Acquires rights to *Wasteland* and *The Bard's Tale* from EA.

2004
Releases first game under inXile brand, action-RPG parody *The Bard's Tale*. It ships the same week as *GTA: San Andreas*.

2007
Currently bringing Web game *Line Rider* to consoles and working on *HeiSt* (set for release this fall).

INTERVIEW

GFW: How do you think the game industry has fundamentally changed since you started making games in 1985?
BRIAN FARGO: Wow, so much for starting small! Well, you know, it's night and day. Back then it was just a hobbyist's business. You couldn't even begin to imagine how you'd make a living at it. We'd try all sorts of different creative things out. You weren't betting your life on every project. The stakes weren't as high, so you could tinker with different things and different ideas. Everybody was pushing the envelope in every category.

Wolfenstein 3D—the first time you saw that, you knew it was the start of something. Same with *Dune*...into *WarCraft*, and so on. People were inventing categories with every game. Some worked, some didn't.

Now it's all sequels, so you don't get that same "inventing of the categories" as you did back then. Everything's very stylized today and very professional. There are good and bad parts to that. I was thinking the other day that our industry is very interesting: Designers don't have [the same clout] they do in different entertainment businesses. Spielberg can walk in somewhere and say, "This is the game I want to make." We don't have that. [*Sims* creator] Will Wright is the closest we have to that, and he's still an employee. You give designers some freedom, and what do you get? *Spore*! That's the way the business is structured these days, and you can't really blame publishers, because they're just doing what they can to survive.

GFW: And your post-Interplay survival tactics include...?
BF: Well, the trick is trying to keep your team small and costs relatively low while finding the right people to work with. Since leaving Interplay, I wanted to ramp up very slowly and look for new talent. That's why we're working with *Line Rider* [see "Line Rider," page 36—*Ed.*]. I saw that as something completely innovative, creating a new breed. I'm proud that at Interplay we gave [some] big developers their first deals—BioWare, Blizzard, and Treyarch, to name a few. I always had a talent for finding good people.

The reality, though, is that for every 20 *Psychonauts*—critical successes that don't sell well—only one becomes a true hit. If you had that kind of track record today, you'd quickly be out of business. That's why you're mostly seeing sequels and licenses—because that's what people are voting for with their dollars. People still say to me, "High fantasy, science fiction...is that the cleverest stuff you guys can come up with?" No, but that's what our users *love*. That's why you see a lot of the same stuff over and over and *over* again.

GFW: Well, you did step way outside the box early on in your career. After creating *The Bard's Tale*, you made the post-nuclear role-playing game *Wasteland*—not your traditional sci-fi fare. And old-schoolers still have fond memories of it....
BF: In a way, we think of *Wasteland* as our version of a sandbox game. We wanted to let people wander around and explore the world without having to push the plot forward. There were side quests, random combat encounters, and puzzles, sure, but we also tried to leave things hanging out there to make players explore. Early on, you're warned not to go near the Citadel. It's right there, in the beginning of the game, but you're not supposed to go in. So what do you do? You go in. And if you escape alive without getting killed, you poke your head back in a few levels later. Still not ready? Come back later. We didn't have to write anything extra—just tease people with what lies inside—and when someone finally survived, there was this real sense of accomplishment. I think that's why some people have so many fond memories of the game. It's kind of like *GTA* today. There's nothing to stop you in your tracks. That's why adventure games pretty much went away, don't you think? If you can't solve the puzzle, the story—and game—come to a halt. People don't like to be stuck.

GFW: That openness of the world also led to moral ambiguity....
BF: Letting people play the game the way they want means dealing with the repercussions that come with actions, right? There's one part in *Wasteland* where someone asks you to save his rabid dog. Kids with BB guns, who are rightly pissed, attack you for defending the dog. You can be the Good Samaritan and walk away, or you can shoot the kids and be done with it. And deal with the consequences later. That's the fun.

GFW: And, of course, that sort of interconnected storyline, cause-and-effect stuff needs lots of planning.
BF: Absolutely, and since game development is like an assembly line these days, that's impossible to organize. You can have a couple hundred people on a project. They'll say, "You do level one; he'll do level three," and you bang something out in 18 months. Some designer working on level 10 doesn't say, "Let's take this NPC from level one and try adding him here." Everybody's moving ahead at 100 miles an hour. There's no time for that subtlety, and that's what gets left out on a lot of projects these days.

GFW: You seemed to pull that off in the recent *Bard's Tale* remake. Was that because you had a smaller team?
BF: That's part of it. The game has a lot of subtlety, characters that appeared from level to level, running jokes. We laid that entire game out on paper. That took a lot of effort and a lot of discipline, but we sat around the room and fake-played through the game. We created funny moments that we could've easily missed otherwise.

GFW: Well, the humor has always been there in your games. It really stood out, and—in some ways—defined your work.
BF: Yeah, but it's not like we can put on the to-do list that "the game has to be funny." When we started the new *Bard's Tale*, for example, I had taken time off to play all the latest RPGs, and the games were doing the same stuff from 25 years ago. We were joking that "I can't >

"'HIGH FANTASY, SCIENCE FICTION...IS THAT THE CLEVEREST STUFF YOU GUYS CAN COME UP WITH?' NO, BUT THAT'S WHAT OUR USERS LOVE. THAT'S WHY YOU SEE THE SAME STUFF OVER AND OVER AGAIN."

"GAMING IS THE ONLY ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY WITHOUT A COMEDY SECTION."

believe this modern game is making me kill rats in the cellar.... I can't believe that there are this many 'Chosen Ones.'" I thought, "Wouldn't it be funny if the main character also saw things the way we as gamers do every day—that the Bard himself had had enough?" I think that's where the humor succeeded in that game. Basically, we have to look to what really inspires us, and then the humor should follow.

GFW: So writing *The Bard's Tale* came pretty easy?
BF: I couldn't have made that game 20 years ago. I didn't have enough real-world experiences to draw upon at that point. Our audience is very intelligent and *very* cynical. Especially you guys [game journalists]! Stupid humor doesn't work. Some of the best stuff that LucasArts did—and BioWare does—requires a level of maturation that a 22-year-old making games probably doesn't have yet.

As designers, if we make a game with humor as a main selling point, we need to make sure that it's genuinely funny and that it doesn't get annoying as you play. Some games do pull it off in small amounts, but for all the talk of stories and plots, only a handful of games [are] truly funny. You know, gaming is the only entertainment industry without a comedy section. And I don't know if that's going to change anytime soon.

GFW: While not many games are straight-up comedy, some do have it in degrees. Take your work on *Fallout*—it bridged that gap, but in a very dark way.
BF: Oh, yeah—we love the dark humor. [*Laughs*] And the older we get, the darker we get. When you mix the absurd with the hyperviolent—like what Tarantino does in films—you can get some great results.

GFW: Bethesda [the developer making *Fallout 3*—see page 26] hasn't really done dark humor in their games. Do you think this will matter?
BF: Yeah, their stuff is a little more serious, a little drier. Humor is tough to do, but you know what? They're clever guys, and I can't wait to see what they do. I know that they'll do well. In fact, I'd trust maybe three developers with *Fallout*—and Bethesda's definitely [one of them]. One thing I can tell you, though, is that our *Wasteland* would be much darker than their *Fallout*.

GFW: That's right—you've acquired the rights to *Wasteland*.
BF: It started it all. If the right design idea comes along, we would love to make another *Wasteland* game. I think Bethesda is gonna do gangbusters with *Fallout*—just great—and if they make a huge hit, maybe people will be curious to get another look at what inspired *Fallout* in the first place.

GFW: Why didn't you just make a *Wasteland* sequel back then? Did it not sell well?
BF: It was strange. You see, EA released *Wasteland* on the exact same day as *The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight*. They were trying to meet financials for their quarter end. We were like the BioWare of that time, known for our RPGs. Imagine if BioWare released two games on the same day. That'd never happen—it makes no sense. So, end of story, the game did well, but it fell under many people's radar because of when it released. We did actually try to get the rights to *Wasteland* to make a sequel, but EA considered us competitors at that point. We had to create *Fallout* as a result.

GFW: Interplay used to be *the* place for all the great RPGs—between BioWare and Black Isle Studios, you guys had a lock. Then Interplay imploded. What happened?
BF: My cost of making a game back in *The Bard's Tale* days was $30,000 to $40,000. *Descent*—which we published about 10 years later—was $300,000. Get to the late '90s, and things are costing millions. That means little room for error. Look at it this way: *Tony Hawk* sold 4 to 5 million, making Activision what it is now. Take-Two has *Grand Theft Auto*. THQ survived off wrestling games. EA? Well, with the lock on *Madden*, that paid for a *lot* of other games that didn't sell as well—and that's to say nothing of *SimCity* and so on. If you didn't have one game that'd carry the day, you were in a world of hurt. All we had was *Baldur's Gate*. We had a heavy royalty load to both BioWare and TSR. So we'd sell 1.5 million copies, but after royalties, that amounted to something like 750,000 copies sold. We were making all these *really* solid efforts, whether it was *Kingpin*, *Descent*, *Icewind Dale*, or *Planescape: Torment*. We just didn't have one that was really going to break us out.

That's when I brought in Titus Interactive to raise capital, but it turned out that the whole relationship was a bad one. Culturally, we couldn't have been more different. They never actually shipped a good product before—after 20 years, all they had to show was a game about a fox? The battles were hard enough to get a game made, but fighting over fundamentals with the executive board was ridiculous. Basically, I said, "It's time to sell and get a different partner." I had some buyers ready, but Titus' demands pretty much stopped anything from happening. It was an untenable situation, and by that point, I handed Titus the keys to what was left and said, "Good luck!"

GFW: With Interplay gone, you don't see as many RPGs as you once did. Why do you think that's the case?
BF: I just don't see many publishers willing to take the chance these days. We went to Microsoft with an idea for an RPG. They didn't even want to hear it. They don't care how great an idea is at this point. It was simply, "Nah, we've got RPGs covered." End of discussion. They have their boxes to check—their shooters, their RTS games, their RPGs. [With] those boxes checked, they aren't interested in hearing about anything else.

GFW: And experiences like that don't sour you to the game industry?
BF: Truth is, it's very hard to make money in the game business. Take my buddy, Jason Rubin from Naughty Dog [creator of PlayStation games such as *Crash Bandicoot* and *Jak and Daxter*]. He left the game business saying, "Screw this—I'll make Internet applications." He said that it was 10 times easier than a game, but he just sold his company for over $20 million, and he wasn't even in business a year. You've really got to be in this because you love it. And I do. ●

• The Bard (2004 version)

RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 BARBARIC

We don't wait to play *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*—we're eyeballing home-video shelves to hold us over. 300 . . . from Mickey's stylized sandbox swashbuckler comes our an all-steam fancy disc formats at the end of July. If you're gawking for an equally raw take on Viking mistreaters, check out Pathfinder. It cutted through theaters (with good reviews—the movie was horrible, but it could make for a fantastic drinking game.

2 MUAHAHAHA!

Looking Glass Studios (*Thief*, *System Shock*) alum Austin Grossman recently penned his first novel, *Soon I Will Be Invincible*—a look at the ambition, love, and trials that come with being a superhero (or supervillain). Oh, yeah, and all that "truth and justice" junk as well. Maybe it'll help us appreciate *City of Heroes/City of Villains* on a whole other level now.

3 GUITAR ZEROS

Some reviews Guitar Hero III a simpler game of musical Simon. Try telling that to the dedicated nerd jockeys at www.theguitarzeroscores. They've modded GH controllers to make real music. Kill their site to listen to the music and watch the concert video—and if you're motivated, download the software tools to mod your own controller for music-making.

4 "CLASSIC" ROCK

The year: 1986. Mullets were cool, pants were acid-washed, and a couple of guys filmed a documentary outside a Judas Priest concert. *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* is one of those cult classics that's been floating around for ages (pre-Intertubes, people dubbed it onto VHS). Twenty years later, it's on DVD with an encore of extras.

5 BOARD GAMING

For the early nerd (before Colon arrived on Xbox Live Arcade) multiplayer board games consisted of "nerds" huddled around a kitchen table, chopping down on Dirty Dwarfs, and moving tiny people around a board, looking to recapture those glory days! Try Mare Nostrum, in which ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Carthage, Egypt, and Rome battle for supremacy.

6 GREMLINS

In *Overlord* (see review on pg. 80), a small horde of minions steal the show. It's fun being a bad guy and all, but we got a whole new appreciation for little havoc-causing critter sidekicks everywhere.

7 NPC: THE GAME

Here's a goofy concept for an RPG game: You're the NPC (well, kind of, in MPC Quest [www.mpcquest.com/] gameplay, you shop, pimp your character for whatever battles he should, and then kick back and watch how well you did. You have zero control over your in-game avatar. There's still some strategy to it, sure, it's just a little more passive than your typical RPG.

8 MASH-UPS

One industrious U.K. DJ lays down solid tracks—and was also kind enough to provide us with a Windows-theme mashup for our podcast. Head to his website (www.thriftshopxl.com) and check out some of his other work—and while you're there, maybe buy a T-shirt or something.

9 PLANESCAPE

Fashed against [illegible] *Planescape: Torment*.

10 BIG DADDY

Do you enjoy decorating your bedroom shelves with disturbing images of horror? The Limited Edition of *BioShock* comes with a figurine of a Big Daddy (early prototype shown), the creepy lumbering deep-sea monster-thing that protects the city of Rapture's slightly creepier zombie children.

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

JULY 2007	PUBLISHER
Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword	2K Games
Dead Reefs	DreamCatcher
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Sword of the New World: Granado Espada	K2 Network
Two Worlds	TopWare Interactive

AUGUST 2007	PUBLISHER
BioShock	2K Games
Guild Wars: Eye of the North	NCsoft
Madden NFL 08	Electronic Arts
Medal of Honor: Airborne	Electronic Arts
Medieval II: Total War—Kingdoms	Sega
Stranglehold	Midway
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	Electronic Arts

SEPTEMBER 2007	PUBLISHER
BlackSite: Area 51	Midway
Crysis	Electronic Arts
CSI: Hard Evidence	Ubisoft
Experiment 112	DreamCatcher
Field Ops	Freeze Interactive
Heroes of Might and Magic V: Tribes of the East	Ubisoft
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	Eidos Interactive
The Office	MumboJumbo
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	Atari
NHL 08	Electronic Arts
Sega Rally Revo	Sega
The Settlers: Rise of an Empire	Ubisoft
World in Conflict	Vivendi Games

LATE 2007	PUBLISHER
Alone in the Dark	Atari
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
Hellgate: London	Namco Bandai/EA
Soccer Fury	NCsoft
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft
TimeShift	Vivendi Games
Unreal Tournament 3	Midway
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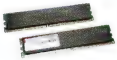

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GEARS

OF WAR

Epic's blockbuster shooter looks sharper and lasts longer on PC

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

COVER FEATURE

"Remember Chris Rock at the 2005 Oscars, right? The comedian and his camera crew go to an L.A. Magic Johnson Theater and ask, what's your favorite movie this year? Everyone agrees it's either *Alien vs. Predator* or *The Chronicles of Riddick*." Producer Rod Fergusson underscores the populist idea: "We weren't necessarily working to conceal every rough edge from game critics. It's always about what resonates with the audience you're trying to reach." Whether or not Tinseltown tastemakers argue the other way around—that those movies are more like videogames—*Gears of War* is an interactive Jerry Bruckheimer flick. As the Xbox 360's fastest-selling game, it's triumphed at the "box office" to boot.

Despite superficial similarities to H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and its underground-dwelling Morlocks, *Gears*' story dodges moral ambiguity (even Marvel Comics' *Namor: The Sub-Mariner* dives fathoms deeper into its culture-clash theme). Until inevitable sequels mine the Locust's will to power, they remain monsters through and through, and the ethically black-and-white game gets as >

arterial red as its Mature rating allows. Evil deserves to die.

Gears encourages players to buzz saw through both CPU-controlled bogeymen and online opponents, to squash heads and march through the dead meat. I ask lead designer Cliff Bleszinski about gratuitous gore and whether it's a guaranteed draw provided the presentation is state of the art. *Doom* and *Mortal Kombat* say so. "It goes back to the time-honored tradition of over-the-top entertainment," he answers, "way back to bloody Shakespeare and savage gladiatorial times. We're playing to the crowd and loving it." Then he turns pensive, thinking perhaps of opportunistic attorneys. "I can tell you one thing. I'm not some crazy masochist sicko. The blood you see flying from soldiers you shoot in a game like *Gears* indicates success. You know that your bullets are, in fact, hitting home. The bright red stuff stands out in this desaturated dystopian world. That's why it's there. That, and, of course, the larger feeling of success you get when your foes break up into bits and go flying."

Guts notwithstanding, one word—visceral—works almost too well when talking about *Gears* and the vivid sensation of physical substance permeating its play. Even roadie running—named to reflect the feel of shaky footage captured by another person following players—intensifies the illusion. "You aren't just Marcus Fenix or [co-op buddy] Dominic Santiago," says Bleszinski, "you're also the embedded cameraman behind them, which is one reason why *Gears* feels so CNN-ready."

Fergusson describes Bleszinski in director mode, leaning over shoulders and e-mailing memos: "Characters going into cover aren't grunting enough, aren't kicking up enough dirt and dust! Cuz, you know, Cliff wanted that weight there. And that's the thing about the game's marble-and-granite architecture. It's not neon, not glass, not chrome—it's grounded. You're in it, and you feel the mass and weight of our world."

Gears' narrative world weighs less, at least as the game itself goes. While extracurricular site browsing and book reading (see: *Destroyed Beauty: An Inside Look at Gears of War*, available with the 360 collectors' edition) reveal planning on Epic's part, the gamer seeking a self-contained story doesn't see it develop >

"I CAN TELL YOU ONE THING. I'M NOT SOME CRAZY MASOCHIST SICKO."

—CLIFF BLESZINSKI, LEAD DESIGNER

VP Mark Rein isn't worried about the success of Epic's engine-licensing venture creating the company's own competition elsewhere. "We root for games that use our engines. Would it bother me if *Mass Effect* sells five million units? Not one bit."

On DX10 systems, *Gears* supports antialiasing tech for smoother silhouettes.

GEARS' ANSWER TO *ALIENS'* QUEEN

A towering 30 feet tall and scale-tipping 11 tons. All teeth and alligator hide, a back like a battleship, and...nowhere in sight? After appearing in *Gears'* promotional material, Brumak—Epic's name for the disaster-bringer prominent on these pages—made little more than an in-game cameo on Xbox 360. "People were—well, I won't say disappointed; that's too strong a word," VP Mark Rein sort of admits. But we *were* disappointed; incredulous, too, as GearsChick proved with a GearsofWarForum.net post asking what she needed to do in order to trigger the showdown she was somehow skipping. At the time, the answer was "We won't tell you to stop posting since this site is such a sausage fest." As of now, it's "Switch to Windows." "We got a couple of phone calls from [Brumak's] agent," Bleszinski kids. "He bargained for screen time, renegotiated his contract. We're only now getting the stench out of our motion-capture studio."

The Windows game's new five-chapter act picks up after the escape from Adam Fenix's estate. "The section is called Timgad," lead level designer Jim Brown says, "and fills in the gap before the train station; it's like lost content telling you what happened along the way, why you're heading to the train, and all that. It's not for beginners by any means. We want to push players, to test them on every lesson they've learned so far."

"One section in particular—it's more or less a Theron Guard nest [Locust in long leather capes]. They're among the more fiercely intelligent enemies you'll face. We split co-op players, so that one guy is up on balconies dueling snipers, and the other is down on the ground handling Therons who run at him. There's Troikas [turrets], there's Seeders [large, explosive launchers that emerge from subterranean tunnels]. We throw it at you all at once, and you have to work well as a team and nail your active reloads or risk running out of ammo or relying on hand-to-hand combat. You don't have the Hammer of Dawn [orbital laser]—Timgad is occupied territory, so Nemecysts ink the sky and interrupt the Hammer's targeting—so you have to find other creative ways to take care of the Seeders, such as shooting the chains that support a theater's stage dressing, dropping the walls on its hole."

Bleszinski blows the lid off one last impediment, and it's the real bitch: "Brumak stalks you throughout the entire level. It's like you need a restraining order on the bastard."

"In some respects, the battle is like the Corpser encounter in the cave," Fergusson says, "but where that was on a rail, Brumak chases you around the arena. There's no time to stand still and press the Y button or Q key. You're roadie running for distance, and Brumak destroys any cover you stick to. We're not giving gamers all the answers in the way that we did with the Corpser."

Bleszinski again: "He bites your head off. You're going to get a big, big kick out of it."

NEW MISSIONS

• "Turret sequences end one of two ways," lead designer Cliff Bleszinski says. "They leave some savvy gamers feeling like what they expected to happen happened, and others disappointed that a dozen enemies didn't burst in. In *Halo 2*, you get on a turret, and it's like, 'Hello, anybody here?' It would be great to hear it go, 'Is this the part where they send in reinforcements so we can shoot them down?'"

Is *Gears* Games for Windows Live's MVP? "I think it's smart for Microsoft to build some experience and build up Games for Windows a bit," Rein says, "but *Halo 2* isn't exactly a new game. Plus, the majority of people who love the franchise will be playing on their Xboxes. They'll be playing the *Halo 2* beta and *Halo 3*. Also, our game isn't Vista-only, so that's not our cross to bear."

in his series of shootouts. This isn't as serious of a complaint as it sounds. Those of us who've played the game agree that it's great. Great enough, in fact, to start splitting hairs over its award-worthiness (even if enthusiast press end-of-the-year nods aren't Oscars).

"I'd rather have people say the story isn't deep than complain that they had to skip nonstop cut-scenes and comlink communications," Bleszinski says. Epic vice president Mark Rein agrees: "At what point are you taking too much control of the camera, making movies and things that aren't interactive? We have so much manpower to produce so much content and we want what we make to be playable."

I find the either/or unfair. Must games either go the way of *Metal Gear Solid*—bloated and intrusive, as Bleszinski suggests—or be purely challenge-based Pac-Men? What of interactive information? The very thing that *does* go on when we tour Sera's slums, and when one character yells to another during combat. The very thing that *could* turn our trek through the Imulsion mines into a window on the theme, obvious in *Gears*' Wikipedia entry, of cheap energy extracted at the expense of the Locust who live at its source. The very thing that defines Valve's *Half-Life 2* direction.

"Honestly, man, we would rather have any narrative elements carried in cut-scenes just happen naturally," says Bleszinski. "But the truth of the matter is that there are certain things you can't count on players seeing... like the big bad Locust stomping little rats. People could be over studying the detail on a column or something, missing the cool moment. At some point it's OK to break from convention for brief moments of noninteractivity in order to show important exposition. And, as amazing as *Half-Life* is, when you compare main characters, *Halo*'s Master Chief is far more iconic, for the fact that he says memorable lines and looks badass in cut-scenes."

Adds Fergusson: "Nobody looks at *Half-Life 2* and says, 'Boy, that's blockbuster pacing.' People want characters diving through windows with explosions chasing them, and you can't have that in purely first-person perspective."

Directing our attention is one of any developer's chief concerns and, like storytelling, yet another potential problem with no cut-and-dried solution. *Gears*' work-around jibes well with what Bleszinski calls the company's "summer popcorn blockbuster." Pressing the Q key or Y >

• Epic outsources some prop- and character-creation work to offshore asset shop Epic China. So what, I ask, is missing the Made-in-USA sticker? According to Rein, "In Gears, it's usually secondary characters such as the Stranded (destitute slum dwellers). Any modeler can make a good garbage can, so if you've got someone who specializes in making great vehicles or weapons or facial animations, it makes sense to outsource the garbage cans and benches and stonework." Ouch.

button when prompted either snaps the camera to points of interest or offers progress-helping hints. "It's our nudge," he says, "halfway between noninteractive cut-scenes and the completely immersive experience. A friend of mine said that you can figure out a movie's plot by keeping in mind that every line costs money. We spend money to make cool stuff happen, and we want our customers to see it. So a chopper buzzes by and blows up the bridge—is it so bad to say, 'Hey, you might want to look to the left'?"

Movies use "look buttons," too...movies like *Alien vs. Predator* more so than those that win Academy Awards. Bleszinski replies: "Videogaming in general sees lots of snobbery, which in some ways can limit success. Look at how cinema handles it, how, when a character comes back, there's the beat-you-over-the-head flashback to the scene of that same character. Savvy moviegoers are like, 'You didn't need to do that. I can see that it's the same character only older because he has the same friggin' birthmark on his face.' But another audience is like, 'Ooh, that's right! That's her; that's the girl.'"

Gamers, unlike moviegoers, indirectly tip off gamemakers to their degree of awareness. Now and then *Gears* adapts accordingly. "In one place flames burst from a pipe. To get through, players need to turn the gas main off with a wheel," lead level designer Jim Brown explains. "If you burn yourself a few times by walking into the fire, the game gets what's happening and gives you a hint."

On Windows, *Gears of War*'s new campaign content (see page 55) offers further opportunity to address player input. In particular, Epic discovered that, with Colonel Victor Hoffman debriefing troops during gunfights, the signal sometimes disappears in the noise. "We have no regrets about the way we get important information to gamers in a dynamic environment," Fergusson says. "We just realize that we should repeat some things more often to drive different points home. Some people weren't sure why they ended up on a train, what the Lightmass bomb was, and what the Resonator really did. We provide more information with the new Timgad mission. Marcus actually asks, 'What, the bomb is on a train?' which is what players were asking, too. We then use the opportunity to explain why. We also hint at intrigue. For instance, Marcus' dad worked to prevent the war. Dom says, >

HOW YOU HANDLE IT

Inspired by *kill.switch*, Namco's underplayed shooter, *Gears*' gameplay swaps "run and gun" for "stop and pop" (as Bleszinski puts it). Players squat behind hard stone barriers, fire, bound between safe spots, and sometimes hurdle into the open, chain saws howling. While the Windows game's interface is identical to the 360's when played via gamepad, keyboard and mouse users can seek cover with either the space bar or double-tapped WASD keys. Additional tuning addresses the mouse's superior sensitivity. Says Fergusson: "On *Gears* 360, a sniper's aim is steady even as he's getting hit. Basically, it's a battle of attrition: Can he drop you before your barrage drops him? With *Gears* Windows, the screen shakes and throws off a sniper's accuracy as he's struck." Similarly, Epic continues to tweak accuracy and recoil variables to prevent pixel-perfect shooters from zipping through campaigns.

'His data's gonna end it.' Marcus responds. 'I don't think he'd appreciate the irony.' We're leaving threads open, though; we don't explain the Locust's origins, we don't reveal what's going on with Marcus' father, and we're not closing questions we purposefully left open. Like you say, we're separating signal from noise and trying to take advantage of the ability to tell more story."

"We'll answer other questions in novels," Rein kids, "and certainly in the New Line Cinema movie"—another probable hit among the same Magic Johnson Theater audience Chris Rock polled. I ask Rein why Epic isn't calling this edition a director's cut, and he laughs, "That's a good idea! I hadn't even thought of that." However, he's not much interested in commentary modes: "I'll tell you why I don't want to do that. We'd spill too many secrets. I like commentary with my comedy—*The 40 Year-Old Virgin* or something, where they're talking us through the waxing—but otherwise it's information that should be on the screen." Or in the *books* and on the *big screen*, as it were. As more and more developers divide their games into microtransactional chunks, it worries me to see stories chopped for piecemeal purchase, too.

MODMAKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE AND TAKE OVER

Drawing on the editing and content-construction tools included with Windows' *Gears*, enterprising types can try directing for themselves. According to Fergusson, "this is the same kit we use" and "you can create single-player, cooperative, and competitive multiplayer maps with it." Epic's commitment to garage talent and DIY game designers is a point of pride evident for everyone I talk to at the company whose "Make Something Unreal" contest turned *Red Orchestra* modmakers into *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45* retail developer Tripwire Interactive, to cite just one inspiring example.

"It's in our DNA," Rein insists. "With [*Unreal Tournament*], we gave good modders money to make improvements, and then shipped their work with our games and bonus packs. With *Gears*, I certainly see opportunity later on to bring user-created content to Xbox Live and Games for Windows Live—some of it for free, and some of it for a cost, which means modmakers might see some money. We don't have the answers on how that's going to work today, though." >

HOW YOU LOOK AT IT

Mark Rein reads the mere mention of *Crysis* as a call to arms. "Is *Crysis* a better-looking game than *Gears of War*? Is that the quote you want? I don't think so. It's great in its own way but it doesn't top *Gears*. Here's my challenge: Let's see how *Crysis* looks on the PC you own." One thing's certain: Epic's game pops on Windows in ways it won't on 360, with sharper resolution, enhanced detail, and, for those running DX10, antialiasing. "Nobody with a decent DX9-class system is getting gypped, though. I hate people who think that they have to go out and buy Vista and a new graphics card...." As I'm wondering whether I've heard right, Rein wraps that very sentence with "we love those guys; we certainly make our games to shine on those systems. That's our modus operandi."

• "Microsoft and Epic share the same ultimate goal—let's make the most money possible," says Rein. "On 360, we felt that giving [maps and Annex mode] away for free was the way to go. They thought that asking people to pay for that content would raise the pile higher. Ultimately, it's their store and their choice. We can't walk into Wal-Mart and say, 'We've got a box of 400 brooms in the back of our car. Would you put them on the floor and give 'em away for free?'" Their compromise? Charge a premium for the content at first, and then offer it for free later on.

MAKE YOUR OWN GEARS MISSIONS

• *Gears of War's* editor is easier to work with than most content-creation tools of its kind.

"UE3 IS PROBABLY THE MOST MODDABLE ENGINE IN EXISTENCE."

—MARK REIN, VICE PRESIDENT, EPIC GAMES

A number of *Gears'* online-related details remain to be decided ("TBD" as Rein and co. continually respond during our conversation). Whether conflicting information from Microsoft PR and Epic indicates normal negotiation or serious unsettled differences is tough to tell, and while the one insists that the game will not support dedicated servers, the other says the matter remains very much up in the air. Outlining the less-convenient scenario, Fergusson says we'll at least see "websites hosting custom content that you can copy to your directory, and which the game will then locate and slip into your UI" but hopes Microsoft will allow automatic distribution via servers (see: Valve's Steam network). If managed well, Epic's editor will offer enormous value to Windows users by way of an ever-expanding suite of mods.

"Simple" projects, such as last-man-standing scenarios that pit players against Locust mobs wielding saws and little else, are likely in the short term, while grueling total conversion jobs take generous time and talent (lead developer Steve Superville warns that incremental modding, which sits somewhere between scripting tweaks and ground-up world building, is a bugger in *Gears of War*).

"Have you heard of *Marcus Golf?*" Rein asks. "One of our Korean licensees wants to build casual, subscription-based games with Unreal Engine 3. We said, sure, no sweat. So one of our programmers goes, 'I'm gonna make a golf game out of *Gears of War*.' An animator gave Marcus a golf swing, another guy created a club and ball, and this dude did the rest: made mounds in the Gridlock multiplayer map, used the grenade throw and the arc that you get to indicate where the ball would go.... It's not something we'd ship, but it shows what you could accomplish in one day. Unreal Engine 3 is probably the most moddable engine in existence, and I don't believe anybody will beat it in that respect. Plus, we're working on a how-to book." Ever his own Barnes & Noble.

For a moment, Rein passes off cross-pollination projects between *Gears of War* and *UT 3* and then pauses. I think I get him with "players in Necris walkers lasering CPU-controlled Brumaks."

"OK, you're right," the *Alien vs. Predator* fan in him agrees. "That's cool, and I guarantee you that modmakers are going to go with it. I don't know whether it'll make us angry or happy, but I'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

MULTIPLAYER

NEW MAPS, NEW MODES

"People are probably sick of hearing about how *Gears*' gameplay is 'stop and pop'," Brown apologizes, "but it's true. I think we ended up with something solid in terms of not necessarily shooting enemies the second that you see them, of encouraging tactical splits—pursuing flanking opportunities and that type of thing."

"We take what other multiplayer shooters have played with and just push it, push people to think about approaching [the genre] in ways other than jumping around like an idiot," Bleszinski agrees. "*Gears* doesn't devolve into how fast you can swing your crosshairs over the other guy's head. We've taken tactical gameplay—which is often painfully sluggish—and turned it into something fun, fast-paced, and intuitive."

I agree. Unlike *Halo*, Epic's game is unique enough in third-person form and function to distinguish itself on PC, and as something other than the console take on experiences established in the *UT* and *Battlefield* series. Nor should reduced player speed, optimized for analog-stick aiming, matter much, since the "jumping idiot" thing is out.

Cross-platform play is out, too. Says Fergusson: "Of course, it came up—you can't have a game on Windows Live and Xbox Live without somebody asking the question—but we weren't able to because of balancing. It's a great bullet point for *Shadowrun*, but I'm [not sure] about the implementation and how interested people are in it." Instead, Epic's adding a mode and three new maps.

"King of the Hill's a hoot," says Bleszinski. "It's a spin-off of the previously available Annex mode but has become its own thing." Instead of seizing territory here and there, teams accrue points by controlling (read: standing in) a single, contested circle. One member must remain inside at all times, and "execution" rules apply: Only explosives and sniper rounds to the skull kill at range, other guns stun for the chain saw and "curb stomp" coups de grâce. "This great dynamic develops where one guy stays put and I go off to the side and pick off anyone trying to get in," he says. "They can't just clear the circle from a distance; they have to actually close in and wipe us out altogether."

"We're making sure that the mode is particularly fun on the new maps," Fergusson adds. "Elevation differences—and Gold Rush has three levels total—are all important. Imagine an oil rig in a lunar crater, that's Gold Rush. The second one's called Sanctuary. It's sort of a nondenominational religious setting with big arches, broken walls, black skies, rolling clouds, and an old-school horror-movie feel. The third, Courtyard, is a park inside a metropolis. You spawn at high points in the battlefield and dash downstairs at the beginning to snag the Boomshot or Hammer of Dawn and stay low or the sniper rifle and return to the top."

"*GEARS* DOESN'T DEVOLVE INTO HOW FAST YOU CAN SWING YOUR CROSS-HAIRS OVER THE OTHER GUY'S HEAD."

–CLIFF BLESZINSKI

***Free Games for Windows Live Silver subscription offers both person-to-person chat and integrated VOIP support for unranked games. Only Gold members, however, have integrated chat in matchmaking games. "I think we're going to get a generous [Gold] trial membership with the game, too," Rein says.**

For more *Gears of War*, visit GFW09.1UP.com, where you'll find extended interviews with Mark Rein, Cliff Bleszinski, and more.

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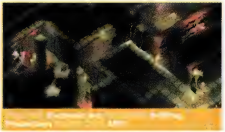

For every game currently getting heaps of hype, countless others deserve credit for inspiring what we play today. That's why, years ago, when *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* went by the name *Computer Gaming World*, we created a computerized Cooperstown—the *CGW* Hall of Fame—to serve as a record of some of the greatest PC games ever made and the people who made them.

We plan to continue this tradition both in our magazine and online at GFWfame.1UP.com. To kick things off, here are five new Hall of Fame inductees: four games, and one game designer.

DUNGEON KEEPER

HALL OF FAME — Games for Windows

Everybody's been a dungeon-raiding hero at some point in their life. But what about the poor schlub who stocks the place, has to reset all the traps, and makes sure that the goblins get fed on a regular basis? When *Dungeon Keeper* shipped in 1997, it flipped the god-game genre on its ear by casting you as the "bad" guy building an evil fiefdom. It was a sinister combination of Bullfrog's genre-defining hit *Populous* infused with a unique perspective and wicked sense of humor.

The interactive black comedy shone through your disembodied, omnipotent hand hovering over the playfield. Grab minions and drop them where they need to go...or slap them around if they start getting out of line. Few games since then have been as challenging, interesting, and uniquely funny as this.

DUNE II: THE BUILDING OF A DYNASTY

HALL OF FAME — Games for Windows

Try to chronicle the genealogy of this genre or that genre—attempt to find the Adam of the FPS or Eve of the RPG—and you'll usually wind up lost and confused. All roads lead to *Wizardry*—but detour through *Akalabeth*, *Dungeon, Dungeons & Dragons*, and *Rogue*. Is the common ancestor of the RTS a 1990 console game called *Herzog Zwei*? Does it reach even further back to 1988 and Danielle Bunten Berry's *Modem Wars*? Or back to 1984's *Ancient Art of War*? The *GFW* historians argue that the "modern" real-time strategy game—three sides, dirt farming, base-building, tech trees, et al—goes back to *Dune II: The Building of a Dynasty*, Westwood's blueprint for *Command & Conquer*, and therefore the blueprint for everything from *Total Annihilation* to *Company of Heroes* to *Tiberium Wars*.

PAST INDUCTEES

People

Chris Barlow Kerry, Game Designer
Jason Carlisle, Programmer
Richard Garriott, Game Designer
Don Gilbert, Programmer and Game Designer
Sid Meier, Game Designer
Ray Muryka, Game Designer
Tim Schafer, Game Designer
Warren Spector, Game Designer
Jon Van Caneghem, Game Designer
Roberta Williams, Game Designer
Will Wright, Game Designer
Greg Zeschuk, Game Designer

Games

SOLD! "Gold Rush" (Sierra On-Line/Dynamix, 1989)
Age of Empires (Microsoft, 1997)
Alone in the Dark (Infogrames, 1992)
Battle's Gate II: Shadows of Amn (Interplay, 2000)
Battlefield 1942 (Electronic Arts, 2002)
Beyond (Field Ops, 1999)
The Bard's Tale (Inf., 1985)
Battle Chess (Interplay, 1988)
Battleground series (Talonsoft, 1995-present)
Betrayal at Krondor (Dynamix, 1993)
Chessmaster (Software Toolworks, 1986)
Civilization (MicroProse, 1991)
Command & Conquer (Westwood Studios, 1995)
Counter-Strike (Mod, 1999)
Crusader: No Remorse (Origin, 1993)
Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight (LucasArts, 1997)
Day of the Tentacle (LucasArts, 1993)
Doom (Id Software, 1993)
Doom II (Id Software, 1994)
Dungeon Master (FTL Software, 1987)
Earl Weaver Baseball (Int. Visions, 1986)
Empire (Interplay, 1978)
EverQuest (Sony Online, 1999)
F-19 Stealth Fighter (MicroProse, 1987)
Falcon 3.0 (Spectrum Holobyte, 1991)
Fallout (Interplay, 1997)
Freedom Force (Electronic Arts, 2002)
Great Page Sports: Baseball Pro (Dynamix, 1991)
Gabriel Knight 2: The Beast Within (Sierra, 1994)
Gettysburg: The Turning Point (SSI, 1986)
Grim Fandango (LucasArts, 1998)
Guardian (MicroProse, 1986)
Half-Life (Valve Software, 1998)
Harpoon (360 Pacific, 1989)
Heroes of Might and Magic II (New World Computing, 1997)

HALL OF FAME

GRAND THEFT AUTO III

Interactive sandbox. M-rated blueprint of debauchery. Political lightning rod. Just about everything there is to say about the *Grand Theft Auto* series has already been said to death. That, however, doesn't take away its impact on the gaming landscape since its console release in 2001 (the PC version came out in 2002). Learning lessons from RPGs, *GTA3* offered action games a way to advance (or not advance) through a 3D world at your own pace. Here was a game where it was just as much fun (if not more) to run over pedestrians as it was to advance the storyline. Whether it's the racially stereotyped gangs, the mature themes, or a dial-full of radio stations with original music and chatter, the game market became more than just a kids' playground. Love it or hate it, *GTA* begat a spate of thug-life emulators (none of which ever manage to stack up to the level of sophistication of the *GTA* series)—and has become the whipping boy of political agendas.

MANIAC MANSION

In 1987, fledgling developer Lucasfilm Games (known today as LucasArts) kicked off a legacy of award-winning graphic adventures with this bizarre tale of mad scientists, abducted cheerleaders, brain-sucking meteors, and oddball tentacle monsters with aspirations of rock stardom. *Maniac Mansion*'s point-and-click interface (something we take for granted these days) offered an elegant alternative to the arguably maddening text parser common to Sierra's adventure games of the era...and the far more forgiving plot structure taught the genre's designers that death need not pose an ever-present threat. The game's popularity eventually bore it a sequel (*Day of the Tentacle*), an oddball television sitcom starring a group of *SCTV* alumni, and even a fan-made remake. Here's hoping that LucasArts hasn't shelved this legendary franchise forever—and that it one day gets back to its roots.

PETER MOLYNEUX

Mad scientist and dreamer, ambitious designer and boy who cried wolf one too many times trumpeting the *greatest game ever*—Peter Molyneux's been called a lot of things, but "lazy" or "creatively bankrupt" aren't among them. And even though an A for effort doesn't earn a lot of friends among PC gamers, Lionhead's *Black & White* and *Fable* at least *aimed* for the stars, only to discover that sometimes getting out of the ionosphere is tricky business.

And when his games *do* break out of gaming's gravity well, they work like magic. *Populous*, *Dungeon Keeper*, *Theme Park*, *Syndicate*, and *Magic Carpet* cut lakes, rivers, and mountains into the PC-gaming countryside. And whether he's got his eye fixated on god game or dog game (*Fable 2* experiments with man's best friend as interface element), we always look forward to what confabulous fabtraption Molyneux's got behind the next curtain.

High Heat Baseball (2000, 2K Sports)
The Incredible Machine (Dynamic, 1993)
Interstate '76 (Activision, 1997)
John Madden NFL Football Series (EA, 1991)
Kensington (SSI, 1990)
King's Quest V (Sierra On-Line, 1990)
Lemmings (Psygnosis, 1991)
Links 386 Pro (Microprose, 1992)
M1 Tank Platoon (Microprose, 1989)
Master of Magic (Microprose, 1984)
Master of Orion (Microprose, 1993)
Medieval: Total War (Activision, 2002)
Mech Brigade (SSI, 1985)
MechWarrior 2 (Activision, 1995)
Might and Magic (New World Computing, 1986)
M.U.L.E. (EA, 1983)
Myth (Bungie, 1997)
No One Lives Forever (Fox Interactive, 2000)
Panzer General (SSI, 1994)
Phoenician (Tomato Software, 1984)
Pirates! (MicroProse, 1987)
Prince of Persia (Broderbund, 1989)
Quake (id Software, 1996)
Railroad Tycoon (Microprose, 1990)
Rainbow Six (Red Storm Entertainment, 1998)
Red Baron (Dynamix, 1990)
The Secret of Monkey Island (LucasArts, 1990)
Sim & Max Hit the Road (LucasArts, 1993)
SimCity (Maxis, 1989)
The Sims (Maxis, 2000)
Splinter Cell (Ubisoft, 2002)
Star Control II (Accolade, 1992)
StarCraft (Blizzard, 1998)
Starflight (Electronic Arts, 1986)
System Shock 2 (Electronic Arts, 1999)
Tetris (Spectrum Holobyte, 1988)
Their Finest Hour (LucasArts, 1989)
TIE Fighter (LucasArts, 1994)
Tomb Raider (Eidos, 1996)
Ultima II (Origin Systems, 1980)
Ultima IV (Origin Systems, 1985)
Ultima VI (Origin Systems, 1990)
Ultima Online (Electronic Arts, 1997)
Ultima Underworld (Origin Systems, 1992)
Unreal Tournament (Epic Games, 1999)
War in Russia (SSI, 1984)
WarCraft II (Blizzard, 1995)
Wasteland (Interplay, 1988)
Wing Commander (Origin Systems, 1990)
Wing Commander II (Origin Systems, 1990)
Wing Commander III (Origin Systems, 1994)
Wizardry (Sirtech, 1981)
Wolfenstein 3D (id Software, 1992)
X-COM (MicroProse, 1994)
You Don't Know Jack (Berkeley Systems, 1995)
Zork (Infocom, 1981)

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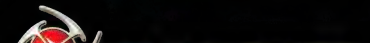

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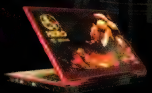

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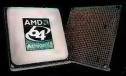

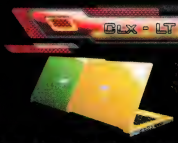

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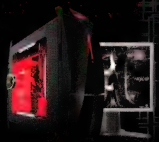

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Reviews

Opinions you can trust

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

I'm just gonna come out and say this: Microsoft sucks at handling first-party PC games. Obviously, the folks up top are keenly interested in rolling Windows Vista out to as many consumers as possible...so how does Microsoft's gaming division pitch in? With two Vista-exclusive releases: *Halo 2*, a port of a 3-year-old Xbox game; and *Shadowrun*, a cross-platform online FPS clearly designed with console gamers in mind, with none of the pizzazz that we've come to expect from most quality PC shooters. *That's* the best Microsoft can do? Go Vista!

Now, I don't mean to turn this into a console-versus-PC rant, but it's painfully obvious that PC games play second fiddle up at the Redmond mothership—and the weak efforts to push Vista as a gaming platform are barely justifiable as "efforts" at all. How about a PC version of *Halo Wars*, or—if Microsoft *really* wants to put its money where its mouth is—a simultaneous PC/Xbox 360 launch for *Halo 3*? And when are we going to get an implementation of Games for Windows Live that actually furnishes the same level of connectivity as its console counterpart (hint: It needs to run independently of whatever game you're currently playing)? Are these guys *even paying attention?* • **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

INSIDE

76 RAID

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

Play Lara Croft's original adventure for the first time again.

77 ROLL

Dungeon Runners

Guild Wars 0.5, or something more?

79 DRAW

Call of Juarez

We reckon y'all will enjoy this well-written Pierogi Western.

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strongly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 4 is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

8-10: Excellent
Game has issues—sometimes major—but remains

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with never-bored

5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only game enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design flaws

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW

REVIEW CREW 1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
Resident übergeek and GFW reviews overlord Ryan Scott splits his free time between comics, rampant *Lost* speculation, and way too many MMORPGs.
Current Faves: *The Lord of the Rings Online, City of Villains, Ticket to Ride*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
Still held tightly in the iron grip of *World of WarCraft*, Sean breaks free every now and again for a good RPG, strategy game, or first-person shooter.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft, Half-Life 2, Tomb Raider: Anniversary*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR
Nerd. Lush. Old-school gamer. Born with a 71-99/4A in his hands, Darren's played on just about every computer and console known to man.
Current Faves: *Sam & Max: Season 1, Battle for Wesnoth*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

SCOTT SHARKEY
STAFF WRITER, 1UP.COM
Scott was raised by wild woodland creatures until the tender age of 5, when they all died. His upbringing was completed by a Nintendo.
Current Faves: *The Lord of the Rings Online, Dungeon Runners*
1UP.com Blog: sidesharkey.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
A hotshot lawyer by day, Eric started gaming at 6 years old...and over 21 years later, his parents still lend his gaming time to two hours a day.
Current Faves: *Europa Universalis III, Command & Conquer 3*
1UP.com Blog: TheFrankfurtSauce.1UP.com

JOE RYBICKI
STAFF REVIEWER
Official PlayStation Magazine alum Joe is now a rogue agent, ready to champion the cause of the innocent in a world of criminals who operate *above the law*.
Current Faves: *PQ2: Practical Intelligence Quotient, Cooking Mama: Cook Off*
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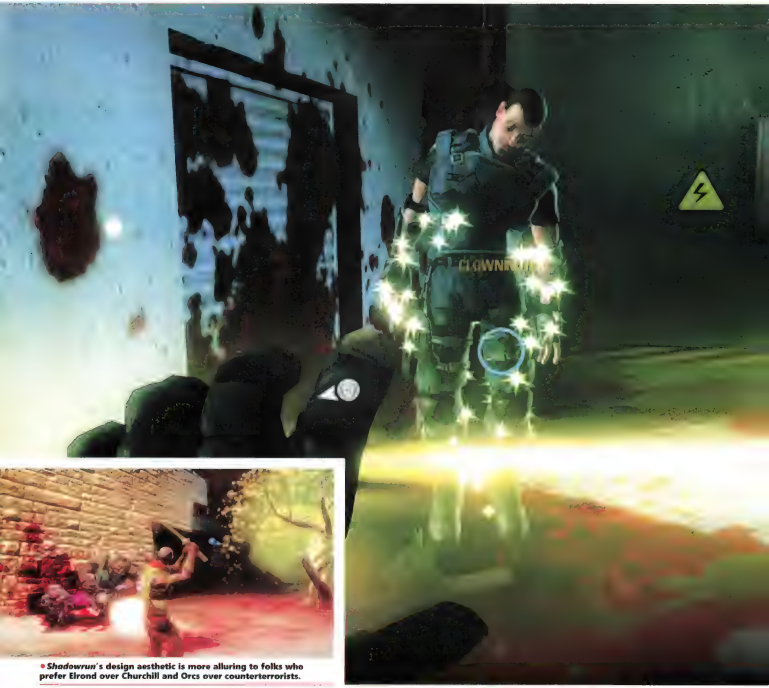


• *Shadowrun*'s design aesthetic is more alluring to folks who prefer Elrond over Churchill and Orcs over counterterrorists.

CONSOLE CROSS-PLAY

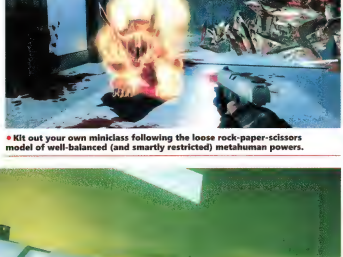
1UP.com gave the Xbox 360 version of *Shadowrun* an 8 out of 10 score—but what's good for the goose isn't always good for the gander. The game simply screws up stuff that PC players take for granted. It has extremely limited server-browsing (when it works); no visible stat-tracking aside from Achievements (without transparency, TrueSkill matching might as well be voodoo); no text chat or command console; no way to make custom maps; and obvious aim/interface concessions. *Shadowrun*'s biggest lure is the chance to play with console-only friends. Maybe. Unless you can't even be sure which team you'll end up on.

• To keep players from being resurrected by their teammates, dismember their corpses. Sounds grisly, but they just vanish in a flash of purple smoke.

SHADOWRUN

The Pledge

PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: FASA Studio GENRE: Multiplayer First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 3.2GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard, Internet connection, Windows Vista MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players (online only) VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box



• Kit out your own miniclass following the loose rock-paper-scissors model of well-balanced (and smartly restricted) metahuman powers.

AS WITH MOST MAGIC TRICKS, *SHADOWRUN* TURNS FROM "OOH!" TO "OH" ONCE YOU SPOT THE ACE TUCKED UP THE PRESTIDIGITATOR'S SLEEVE.

REVIEW

It's one of the most protracted tutorials you'll ever play, but it's also one of the most promising: regenerative golden trees straight from an Aronofsky film; magic-sucking grenades that weaken minds and Trolls' armored hides; energy monsters summoned from the place between worlds; brain gear that lets you spot enemies behind walls—and juju that lets you teleport *through* those walls. Work your way through *Shadowrun's* offline training missions, and you'll begin to believe its tagline's bold claim that, by gum, the rules of engagement *have* been rewritten.

THE TURN

But, as with most magic tricks, *Shadowrun* turns from "Ooh!" to "Oh" once you spot the ace tucked up the prestidigitator's sleeve. That summoned beast from beyond? Well, he's pretty much a turret. The noble Tree of Life? A health dispenser placed by another game's medic. Enhanced Vision? Teleport? Developer-sanctioned wall hacks. Derivation is no sin by default, of course—so why does this shooter wear out its welcome so quickly?

Maybe it's the game types: You basically get only two versions of Capture the Flag and one version of Deathmatch, and that's it. Maybe it's the waiting: Click "Play," and it can take up to five minutes to find your first game, assuming you haven't messed with your game-type preferences (to be fair, once you're hooked up with a party, play moves smoothly from match to match...unless a server goes down; then it's back to square one).

Maybe it's the maps—complex anthills of zigzagging corridors and crisscrossing ramps, with multiple high roads for gliding types, underground tunnels for folks who prefer to crawl up ladders the old-fashioned way, and compound layers to mitigate the tactical trump card of X-ray vision and teleportation. The magical backdrops hang together better—both structurally and thematically—than the unappealing shantytowns and warehouses, and so only half of the nine maps really qualify as much fun. Maybe it's the overall lack of variety: Many single-player shooters (or their free mods) have more multiplayer content than this stand-alone game.

Or maybe it's *Shadowrun's* ultimate solution to cross-platform play. Depending on how you look at it, FASA has either given Xbox 360 players luxurious aim assistance (get your enemy in the big pizza-sized targeting circle and you're set—or purchase Smartlink technology for even *more* tracking help), or they've gimped PC players by eliminating the advantage of pixel precision. As in some other tactical shooters, moving temporarily widens your cone of spray, which would be fine if most weapons weren't hugely inaccurate even when you're crouched and statue-still. Only the sniper rifle takes much advantage of the mouse. Even hotkeys are gimped—you can purchase a large number of powers over the course of a game, but you can map only three at a time (exactly the right number to fit on the 360 controller's bumpers and triggers). PC shooter buffs will rightly resent this—and FASA's succeeded in making a PC FPS that will appeal mostly to people who don't like FPSes. That kind of paradox would normally stop a game's development cold on day one.

This is also the first time I've seen Live Achievements actively work *against* a game. In public matches, team tactics vanish as folks spam Trees of Life ("I'm trying to get my Healing Achievement!") or run rampant with swords simply so they can finish up their MMORPG-ish quota of 100 katana kills. I know this because people announce these intentions over Live chat as often as they yell, "Rez me! Rez me! Rez me!"

THE PRESTIGE

The PC version of *Shadowrun* does come with its own unique joy: Your rare arrival in a game lobby is treated like the return of a lost astronaut, the discovery of the last unicorn, or the birth of a messiah. The heavens open; the fatted calf is slaughtered; Achievements unlock in your wake. The Live voices stop jabbering and whisper, awed, "The Vista player...*he is here.*" • **Sean Molloy**

VERDICT

- **Cool setting; useful tactical powers; interesting race/class mix.**
- **Not enough to it; cross-platform compromises neuter PC's strength.**

5\10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

Anniversary is rife with familiar scenes from the first game, redone with graphics that don't suck ass.

TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY

A worthy celebration

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Crystal Dynamics** GENRE: **Action-Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM (512MB with Vista), 4GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Poor Lara Croft. She's spent an awful lot of time getting kicked around by her creators. But last year's *Legend* went a long way toward redeeming Lara and compensating for the many wrongs done to her and the franchise. Now, *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* proves that was no fluke.

As a retelling of the original story, *Anniversary* is all about archeology and exploration—in short, *raiding tombs*. In fact, *Anniversary* feels like what *Tomb Raider* was always intended to be. The story is the same, the levels are named the same, and they're set in the same areas...but virtually everything else is different. Gone are the vast black, cubist spaces of the first game, replaced by enormous, gorgeous, detailed levels with plenty of opportunities for vertical movement and vertigo-inducing acrobatics.

I do miss those open spaces, though; being in the middle of a small pool of light in a seemingly limitless cavern gave a sense of scale and exploration that *Anniversary* doesn't quite match. But that's a small complaint that's more than made up for by the excellent pacing and level design, which provide some nice scares and genuinely tense moments.

LEGENDARY

Playing to the strengths of *Legend*'s engine, *Anniversary* features an exceptionally acrobatic Lara. She scales ledges, leaps onto columns, and grapples along walls at a furious pace clearly inspired by the recent *Prince of Persia* games. Trouble is, *Anniversary*'s got no Rewind button. At first, that's not much of a problem, as the focus is more on exploration and puzzles. But as you move into the third act, things start to get considerably more challenging, building up to an absolutely vicious endgame, which features a positively sadistic series of traps and fingernail grabs (yes, you are correct: trying to play this without a gamepad is an excruciating experience).

It's not as infuriating as it *could* be; a generous checkpoint system mitigates the frustration as much as possible. But one downside to moving from the original games' square-by-square movement to a more fluid system is that it can make for some annoying quirks when executing difficult jumps. You'll hit areas where you have to get the angle *just* right...and find yourself missing the jump over and over as you try to figure out the precise positioning. This sort of issue is compounded by the squirrelly, hyperactive camera. You're not *constantly* fighting it, but it intrudes just enough that you'll notice it more than you should.

Looking at *Anniversary* as a whole, though, these issues are fairly negligible. Overall, it's a solid, entertaining game with a hell of a lot of fun stuff packed in (including a fairly extensive bonus quest set in Croft Manor). It may not offer the same degree of wonder you may remember if you were around for the very first game, but it's a damn fine homage—and a damn fine game in its own right.

• **Joe Rybicki**

VERDICT

- **Gorgeous levels; some interesting puzzles.**
- **Squirrelly camera and controls.**

8.5\10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

• ***Tomb Raider: Anniversary*** **has nice cinematic scenes...it's just too bad you have to fight the camera to switch from "cinematic" to "usable."**

AS A RETELLING OF THE ORIGINAL STORY, *ANNIVERSARY* IS ALL ABOUT ARCHEOLOGY AND EXPLORATION—IN SHORT, *RAIDING TOMBS*

• Gigantic pizza cutter for the win.

DUNGEON RUNNERS

Contagious Exquisite Online Action-RPG from the Ghetto

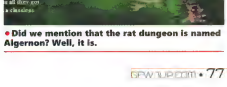
PUBLISHER: **inCon!t** DEVELOPER: **inCon!t** GENRE: **Action-RPG** [illegible] **Free** [illegible]
CORE engine: **Torn** [illegible] PROCESSOR: **2GHz** CPU, **256MB RAM, 1GB** hard drive space [illegible]
MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Live ver. 0.1**

REVIEW

It's one thing to completely nail that carrot-on-a-stick thing that *Diablo* did so well; we've seen lots of games pull it off since then, and even more that tried. But to pull it off while simultaneously taking the piss out of every cliché in the genre—that's a trick.

Dungeon Runners knows it's a *Diablo* knock-off, and it beats you over the head with that knowledge, constantly and hilariously. Remember *Diablo*'s Deckard Cain and his crazy Sean Connery voice? Half the people you talk to have even crazier Sean Connery voices and make stupid martini jokes in them. That "Godly Plate of the Whale" loot-naming convention everyone unabashedly ripped off? *Dungeon Runners* does it, too...except you'll be picking up crap like the "Contagious Exquisite Decoder Ring of the Nihilistic Crocodile" or the "Rambunctious Cardboard Ax from the Ghetto." NPCs sarcastically thank you for busting into their houses and raiding their chests. The whole thing doubles as not only a pretty good action-RPG, but as a send-up of the entire genre.

Better still, it costs exactly jack—unless you want to actually equip the game's rarer drops, in which case it'll run you five bucks a month. With no price tag for the game itself, and a subscription fee that asks about the same as a single gallon of gas, *Dungeon Runners* has a pretty nice cost-reward ratio going for it...and they'll probably even refund your $0 if the game doesn't do anything for you. • **Scott Sharkey**



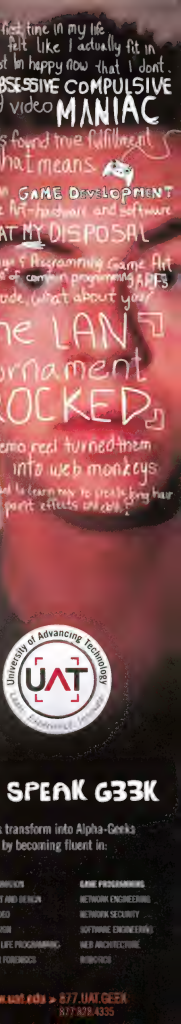
• Did we mention that the rat dungeon is named Algernon? Well, it is.

VERDICT

- **Fun. Free. Something that starts with "F" and ends in "awesome."**
- **Whaddaya want for nothing? A rubber biscuit?**

8/10

Games for Windows



The Covenant invades Earth! A chunky, blocky, brown, deserted depiction of Earth, anyway.

HALO 2

The simplest enigma

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Bungie/Hired Gun** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, Windows Vista** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Time's slapped a big gold "console classic" sticker on *Halo 2*; I can see why. *Halo 2* was a benchmark for FPSing with analog sticks; its dual-wielding expertly worked the button layout of an Xbox control pad. Co-op was a blast. Vast multitudes still play on Xbox Live, and for good reason—its simple matchmaking tools and party system (which let you tag along with friends from match to match with minimal effort) were a revelation and a revolution. For consoles. In 2004.

A CARNIVAL OF SORTS

Transported to PC in 2007, however, Bungie's console classic looks downright primitive—especially when landmark games like *Half-Life 2* and *Battlefield 2* have reset the bar for what a PC FPS can and should do.

If you're considering picking it up for the single-player campaign, reconsider: Switching viewpoints between Master Chief and one of the game's nonsensically religious outer-space shark-monkeys was, and is, a narrative disaster—and the game's ending, an abortion on the Xbox, is still an abortion here. The original *Halo*'s story was better. The shooting-gallery-style gameplay was simple then and is even more so now, as the chunky, Muppety Covenant seemed unprepared for the precision and speed of the mouse. Enemies and effects look slightly sharper and shinier, but textures and level structures that worked just fine on the Xbox look gross on modern PCs. Characters not clad in shiny helmets or made of pure energy have a bad case of cookie-dough face, and corridors and stairwells consist of repeating patterns of trapezoids and triangles. It's all fun and colorful, but so is a carnival—and equally run-down.

UNIVERSAL QUESTIONS

As proof of concept for Games for Windows Live, *Halo 2* is partly convincing. You won't have trouble finding a game online, and enough folks play to keep a half-dozen or so public servers full at any time—though unless you happen to have a dozen friends with *Halo 2* and Windows Vista, you'll have to settle for whatever mode the masses are playing, which is usually Slayer (deathmatch)...or if you're lucky, Team Slayer (even the more "complicated" modes are simplistic; suck it up or sit it out).

WHY WINDOWS VISTA?

The control scheme makes few concessions for PC gamers. Instead of using a run key, you move at the console version's "max speed," which barely qualifies as a light jog. Plug in an Xbox 360 control pad and you're treated to instant transformation of HUD elements and *generous* aim assist. Nearly two dozen maps populate the game—though the online community's already settled on its subset of choice. Despite some silly level design (and spawn points that stick you in instant-frag situations), the fun weapons and vehicles prevail through brute force—no apologies or excuses.

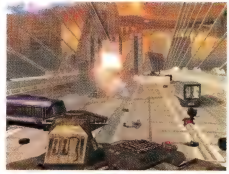
But I'm left with the same questions I had when *Halo 2* for PC was first unveiled to thunderous confusion: Why Windows Vista? If the answer really is just GFW Live, then why no cross-platform play, when the game would clearly benefit from the immense Xbox community? If it's as simple as technical constraints, then why even bother? A game this simple shouldn't be so damn puzzling. **Sean Molloy**

VERDICT

- **Lots of multiplayer maps to choose from; GFW Live implemented decently.**
- **Not many people online; primitive visuals and gameplay; Vista required.**

6\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows



Dual-wielding makes perfect sense on a console, but it's less intuitive with a keyboard and mouse.

TRACKMANIA UNITED

Evidently, the French don't hate everything united

PUBLISHER: **Focus Home Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Nadeo** GENRE: **Racing** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, Retail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.3GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Retainable**

REVIEW

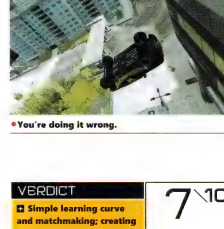
The days of *Pale Position* are gone. No longer can you toss a quarter into a machine, grab the wheel, and careen head-long into an 8-bit winner's circle. These days, the most popular racing games require you to manage everything from gear ratios to suspension tightness—and manage them well, if you hope to take that coveted champagne shower. Now, don't get me wrong: I love me some gear ratios, but even I sometimes find myself waxing reminiscent about the heady days of pick-up-and-play racing.

Enter French developer Nadeo and the latest iteration in its *TrackMania* series: *TrackMania United*, a "classic" racer in the *Pole Position* mold. You need little more than two buttons and a thumbstick to enjoy the hundreds of tracks *United* offers; the simple system is perfect for those intimidated by *Gran Turismo* but still jonesing for a little velocity. Unfortunately, that velocity often hits zero as a result of *United*'s penchant for locking up—both on the track and in the custom map editor.

And that map editor—when *United* maintains its stability—is undoubtedly the game's marquee feature. Although it could've used a tutorial for the more esoteric elements, with a little trying and erring you'll be laying down tracks faster than John Henry with a scorpion in his boxers. Indeed, a big part of *United*'s entertainment value lies in spending hours tweaking every detail of your custom maps until your OCD temporarily abates. More importantly, the map editor takes *United* beyond its spiritual racing ancestors: *Pole Position* may have been white-knuckle fun, but *United* combines that with the sheer mad-scientist fun of building something and watching it come to life.

• **Eric Neigher**

THE SYSTEM IS PERFECT FOR THOSE INTIMIDATED BY *GRAN TURISMO* BUT STILL JONESING FOR A LITTLE VELOCITY



• **You're doing it wrong.**

VERDICT

- **Simple learning curve and matchmaking; creating custom tracks is a blast.**
- **Racing mechanic is a bit limited; editor could use a tutorial; stability problems.**

7\10 GOOD

Games for Windows

CALL OF JUAREZ

Skin that smoke wagon and see what happens!

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Techland** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.2GHz CPU, 512 MB RAM, 2.4GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Holy cliché! Who would we thought a Polish developer would create one of the best-written English-language games of the year? And a Western, too! Joseph Conrad, your countrymen have taken up your legacy, whoever penned this script deserves to be lauded profusely.

Jaime follows the exploits of two protagonists in its Leone-worthy setting: the shiftless Billy Candle and his unpunctual, the redoubtable reformed ruffian Reverend Ray. While Billy is a compelling character—people to the producers for not shying away from the racism he encounters because of his half Mexican heritage—the real star here is the Reverend. Forget Gordon Freeman, Master Chief, even Duke Nukem: The Reverend is the most badass, gun-toting, bullet-throwing, Bible-quoting son of a bitch ever to be transformed into ones and zeroes. I dare anyone not to cluck a slow cluc at the Rev huris "AND THEY SHALL KNOW MY NAME IS

WHOEVER PENNED THIS SCRIPT DESERVES TO BE LAUDED PROFUSELY

[BRAVO!] at Juarez's rocky evidence, along with an (unhealthy dose of lead.

Aside from a few frustrating "stealth" sequences, Juarez is an accessible, fast-paced meat-and-potatoes FPS. You've got your free-roaming, your rail sequences, your boss battles, and your multiplayer—and while hardcore twitch junkies may find the challenge a bit lame, the writing alone provides reason enough to keep playing. If only that could be said of a few other games, this industry might truly be worthy of taking up the baton that Hollywood dropped all those years ago. And so, all praise be unto Techland, for theirs shall surely be the kingdom of heaven, as long as they continue making games like this.

• **Eric Neigher**

• **Do you see this, kids? This is what happens when you don't use a designated wagon driver!**

VERDICT

- **Engaging, exciting story; Reverend Ray is the coolest game character ever.**
- **Loooooong load times; a few lame stealth sequences; kinda easy for the FPS pros.**

8\10 GOOD

Games for Windows

OVERLORD

For the horde!

REVIEW

Being evil? Hell, that's easy. Letting players unleash their id and make 'em laugh at the same time? *That's* the hard part. Yet, between ordering the demise of countless sheep and gutting rabid unicorns, that's exactly what's happening in third-person action-adventure *Overlord*.

Many games try dangling that cause-and-effect karmic pendulum, yet it rarely fazes; you don't care what happens. Embracing that, *Overlord* essentially says, "Go on. Be the most insufferably evil bastard on the planet, and we won't punish you any more than we would if you actually decided to help people." Saving the town's food supply is an option, sure—the people will give you a hero's welcome. On the other hand, hoarding the stash and killing witnesses can lead to additional side quests...like, say, kidnapping women to create your own harem. Since evil deeds unlock so many more cool options, the challenge becomes doing the "right" thing (achieving a zero-percent corruption rating's easier said than done).

THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

Still, *Overlord* isn't really about the overlord. Yes, you can buy weaponry or kit the castle with everything from torture gear to coffee tables, but your gang of adorably sadistic minions steal the show. Point in a direction and let 'em go; they know to attack targets, loot the area, or move objects...and if you're low on health, your subjects willingly jump into a nearby shrine and die to restore you. At first, they're fodder to fling into fights, consequences be damned. If they die, you just call up more. Something happens along the way, though: You get attached to the little guys.

You want to keep that pumpkin-headed, dress-wearing imp alive—not only because you've had him since the beginning, but because new gear means a more powerful minion. Besides, the aforementioned "meat grinder" strategy only works for so long. Tactics eventually come into play with new minion types: Reds hurl fireballs, greens excel at stealth, and blues hang back as healers. Suddenly, combat requires more finesse than just throwing those brown scrapper minions at every dilemma.

> SOMETHING HAPPENS ALONG THE WAY: YOU GET ATTACHED TO THE LITTLE GUYS

The problem is that you need finer control than the keyboard-and-mouse setup offers. Play enough battles requiring simultaneous attacks from a gremlin horde and your antihero, and you'll notice a huge difference when using a gamepad. As is now becoming standard, *Overlord* maps its controller layout to the ubiquitous Xbox 360 pad—the left stick moves the master, and sweeping the right stick gives total control of the minions. So if you don't already own a gamepad, add that to the price tag.

Your flunkies also embody *Overlord*'s one weak point: Loosen the iron grip, and they'll stupidly drown themselves chasing after a bug...or race headlong into overwhelming odds. Maybe the boneheaded A.I. is intentional; maybe they're *supposed* to be feral lemmings, and the game's forcing you to slow down for tactics—but I ain't buying it. With a throng of mischievous pets as the game's centerpiece, you'd expect 'em to be a little better housebroken. I lost track of how many times I voluntarily restarted from a checkpoint to keep one dopey übergremlin alive. Then again, any game that makes me *want* to restart—rather than making me *have* to restart—can't be all bad. ● **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **A genuinely different—and darkly funny—game.**
- **No map means getting lost frequently; boneheaded minions occasionally off themselves accidentally.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

● **Here we're ransacking Melvin's kitchen and equipping the horde with whatever's lying around—including butcher knives and pumpkins.**

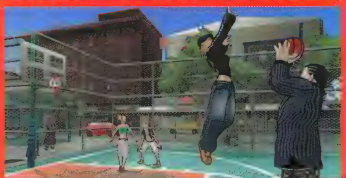
REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

RESIDENT EVIL 4

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Capcom** GENRE: **Survival-horror**
AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

How's this for scary: a PC game, released in 2007, with zero mouse support. *None*. So the one thing you might hope to get from the PC port of Capcom's brilliant *Resident Evil 4* is the one thing you don't get. Bravo! Way to miss the point of a PC port! On the other hand, the game *is* brilliant—one of the best survival-horror games ever made—so if you didn't play the console versions, it's worth it, as long as you have a gamepad or don't mind using just the keyboard. The higher-res graphics are great, too, which makes blowing the heads off zombies that much cooler.



FREESTYLE STREET BASKETBALL

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **JCEntertainment** GENRE: **Sports**
AVAILABILITY: **Free Download (freestyle.sierraonline.com)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space**
MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Final Downloadable**

Buy a new pair of Nikes, but don't kid yourself—they're not adding an extra 12 inches to your vertical jump. Still, that's exactly what the deal is in *FreeStyle*, the b-ball MMO. The game is technically free (go on, download and play it right now), but once your urban-outfitted avatar starts leveling up, you'll want to pay for stat-boosting gear. The online matching system ensures that your rookie player won't get clowned by level-awesome pimps, but you just won't dig the keyboard-only gameplay—even in the *Dr. J and Larry Bird Go One on One* days, you could plug in a joystick.

MONSTER MADNESS: BATTLE FOR SUBURBIA

PUBLISHER: **Southpeak Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Artificial Studios** GENRE: **Action**
AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 800MB hard drive space, 128MB videocard**
MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

Nothing beats grabbing a buddy and collecting absurd weapons to mow down hundreds upon hundreds of monster-movie clichés. *Monster Madness* would be a pretty spiffy remake of *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*...if it weren't hampered by lousy, unmappable controls, insta-death environmental hazards, a frustrating checkpoint system, and vehicles that steer like a fat kid in a go-kart. The competitive arena mode is a curious (and wasted) addition, considering that online co-op play—the one feature that might've made *Monster Madness* an attractive purchase—is nowhere to be found.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: AT WORLD'S END

PUBLISHER: **Disney Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Eurocom** GENRE: **Action**
AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.4GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)**
MULTIPLAYER: **1-2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

This *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie tie-in is pretty much the textbook definition of "sloppy": boring, tactically bankrupt combat that boils down to simple button-mashing; connect-the-dots mission objectives; multiple characters with no real differences in play style; and awful graphics that don't scale beyond a Stone Age 1024x768 resolution. At least developer Eurocom got the voices right, with some dead ringers standing in for Johnny Depp and company. If we were going to make a cliché plank-walking joke while advising you to avoid *At World's End*, now would be an excellent time.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

GRAB BAG

Fiending for a good game to play over the long, dry summer months? Here are five excellent titles to take a peek at if you missed out on 'em.

COMPANY OF HEROES

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War developer Relic Entertainment shifts from postapocalyptic Orcs to battle-hardened World War II soldiers in this beautifully gritty real-time strategy game. *Company of Heroes* embraces the same capture-and-hold strategic gameplay style as *Dawn of War*, with even better A.I. that intrinsically understands concepts like cover and suppression fire and messy, war-torn battlefields that don't waste any time with old-school dirt-farming concepts.

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: GOLD EDITION

If you still have a copy of 1999's Master of Orion II on your hard drive, that's probably because you haven't tried Sierdock's 2000 heir to MOO's unmatchable throne, Galactic Civilizations II. Drool lands build colonies, trade tech with aliens, and construct your own custom fleets from a toy box full of spaceship parts. The Gold Edition package is even better—it comes bundled with the indispensable Dark Avatar expansion. At the side quality single-player turn-based strategy games come out, you'll be hard pressed to find something to top it until the year 2016.

INDIGO PROPHECY

This modern reinterpretation of the classic adventure-game genre from gaming auteur David Cage casts you in the unlikely role of a murderer—and then a homicide detective—and then the murderer again. Mature, complex, and unlike most of what you see on store shelves these days, *Indigo Prophecy* (renamed in the U.S. from its original title, *Fahrenheit*, much to Cage's dismay) is the gaming equivalent of an indie film that somehow got released into mainstream channels. Unlikely minigame sequences (think *Dragon's Lair* or Simon Says) and convoluted third act aside, it's one of those envelope-pushing underdogs we all wish they made more of. If you buy it, then maybe they will.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

The latest *GTA*'s biggest claim to fame may be its hidden sex minigame that lit up the ESRB like a Christmas tree (the current Version 2.0 removes this "unintentional" feature), but the actual game itself is a pretty good takeoff on *Boyz n the Hood*–style gangster culture, with the usual display of carjacking, mofo-capping, and general political incorrectness. *San Andreas* also features some light RPG-ish character-building mechanics and spans three huge cities.

TICKET TO RIDE

This PC conversion of Days of Wonder's award-winning board game is one of those quality pleasures that sucks you in and never lets you go. Up to five players race to connect various railway routes across U.S. or European maps (it plays much better than this paltry description suggests). This port also lets you race over a thriving online community. Get it at www.daysofwonder.com.

REVIEW INDEX

Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
1701 A.D.	8	2
Ancient Wars: Sparta	5	8
ArmA: Combat Operations	6	8
Battlestations: Midway	5	5
Blitzkrieg II: Fall of the Reich	5	6
City Life: World Edition	8.5	6
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	9	6
The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles	8	7
Europa Universalis III	9	4
Flyboys Squadron	3	4
Forge of Freedom	6	4
Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar	9	6
Genesis Rising: The Universal Crusade	3	7
IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946	10	7
Infernal	6	7
Jade Empire: Special Edition	7	5
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	9	8
Maelstrom	6	5
Making History: The Calm & the Storm	6	7
Myst Online: Uru Live	6	7
Need for Speed: Carbon	7	3
Penumbra: Overture	5	8
Rainbow Six: Vegas	7.5	4
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	8	7
Sam & Max: Episode 2—Situation: Comedy	7	4
Sam & Max: Episode 3—The Mole, the Mob, and the Meatball	7	5
Sam & Max: Episode 4—Abe Lincoln Must Die!	8	6
Sam & Max: Episode 5—Reality 2.0	7	7
Sam & Max: Episode 6—Bright Side of the Moon	8	8
Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game	7	6
The Shield	4	4
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Silverfall	3	7
The Sims 2: Seasons	8	5
Spider-Man 3	7	8
Star Trek: Legacy	5	4
Supreme Commander	7	5
Test Drive Unlimited	8	7
Theatre of War	4	8
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	9	5
Top Spin 2	6	7
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	3	6
War Front: Turning Point	5	5
Whirlwind Over Vietnam	4	8
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	10	5

Building a Better PC

How to maximize your Games for Windows® experience

News flash: With the fall and holiday months fast looming, every gamer worth his weight in joysticks knows that the coming weeks will bring a dizzying whirlwind of high-profile Games for Windows®–branded releases.

Mind you, the average high-end Windows XP or Windows Vista™ user can readily dive right into blockbuster titles like **Hellgate: London™** and **World in Conflict™**. But to fully appreciate these all-star outings, it's a given that you'll want to invest in an ultrapowered PC.

Thanks to manufacturers like Dell™, coasting on technology's bleeding edge needn't cost a fortune or require that you possess a masters in computer engineering. Dell gaming guru Abizar Vakharia reveals the secrets to shopping for a killer desktop rig without breaking a sweat:

Case—Your system's chassis is its backbone, Vakharia insists, and should provide maximum flexibility. That means boasting four to six USB ports for connecting add-ons like an Xbox 360™ Controller for Windows and an equal amount of slots for devices like a CD-RW drive, DVD drive, and sound card. A couple bays should be free for further expansion as well, "just in case something else cool comes out in the next six months."

Central Processing Unit (CPU)—"Choose systems with multicore processors," Vakharia advises. "As more games become optimized for use with them, they'll deliver better performance." Certainly, you can save in the short run by choosing a dual-core system, which offers solid results. But Vakharia counsels springing for a quad-core unit if possible, as it'll provide greater scalability in the future. See Dell's XPS™ 720 H2C™ ultimate gamer's PC for a prime example.

Graphics Processing Unit (GPU)—As gaming accessories go, your computer's video card offers maximum bang for the buck. The more power and memory (256MB should be a bare minimum, with 512MB recommended) it possesses, the sharper in-game visuals will look and the faster and smoother they'll run. "When shopping for a GPU, DirectX® 10 support is also a must," adds Vakharia. "Your video card should further offer the ability to be paired with a second GPU to achieve even more impressive results."

Memory—"Windows Vista will be the driving OS going forward," Vakharia insists. Meaning that, as per its basic requirements, you'll need no less than 512MB of RAM, or 1GB for optimal functionality. Likewise, response time is also important—it's the reason Dell, like many vendors, uses specialized RAM that can be overclocked for enhanced speed and performance.

Monitor—Gorgeous, big-screen viewing, e.g., like that provided by Dell's 30-inch 3007WFP-HC flat panel monitor, is the way to go. The bigger your monitor and the higher its resolution, the more colors and details will jump out. If money's no object, you can additionally link two, or even three, separate monitors to form the ultimate viewscreen. Vakharia recommends LCD models, which are just as speedy as their CRT counterparts yet frequently provide sharper visuals.

Hard Drive—"The hard drive directly supports your gaming experience," says Vakharia. "That's why I suggest buying as much space as you can afford." Games have a large footprint, he explains, as do videos and music. "The worst part is figuring out how to scale upward later," he chuckles. Using a RAID solution—which writes information on several drives, thereby improving speed and facilitating data recovery—is also recommended.

Prefer something a little more portable?

Keep your ears open for a jaw-dropping announcement in just a few weeks as Dell's laptop division gets ready to redefine the possibilities for gaming on the go.

The best part, however you choose to play: Either way, with Dell's PCs and Microsoft's Games for Windows initiative, you just can't go wrong.

Hardware Helper

Getting the most from your gaming accessories

Ask any PC gamer, and they'll tell you the benefits of investing in Microsoft® Hardware's many gaming products are both obvious and substantial.

Do so, and you won't just experience interactive outings stamped with the pioneering Games for Windows® brand the way their creators intended. You'll also be playing in the lap of luxury, enjoying devices custom-engineered to improve performance, enhance immersion, and provide a level of comfort rivals simply can't match.

Little-known secret, though: For every wide-eyed enthusiast dreaming of copping a killer wireless game controller or slick, fully customized keyboard, several dozen who already own them have yet to fully take advantage of these awesome accessories. Put bluntly, while you may already possess the essential tools needed to get an edge on opponents, you might not truly be doing everything within your power to play to win.

Keen to understand more, we cornered Bill Jukes, product marketing manager for gaming devices, to get the scoop on the hottest features hiding within these first-class, high-tech peripherals. And, naturally, learn why the industry's leading Windows XP– and Windows Vista™–compatible hardware add-ons are even more exciting than you think.

HINTS AND TIPS

Habu™ Laser Gaming Mouse
Recommended Genres: Action, Adventure, Puzzle, FPS, Strategy

• Dynamically toggle sensitivity (400, 800, 1600, and 2000 DPI settings available) to fit individual games at the press of a button. Lower sensitivity helps in games like **Halo® 2**, where pinpoint precision is crucial. Higher sensitivity, however, is preferable in titles such as **Supreme Commander™**, where speed's more important.

• A plug-and-play device, the **Habu** makes a great fit for gaming on the go, such as when playing on a laptop. Its high degree of sensitivity further pays off when enjoying Games for Windows titles in cramped spaces, e.g., while reclining in an airplane seat.

• Wrist cramping? Removable side button panels let you soothe aches by allowing you to adjust layouts to fit the size of your hand or personal preference.

• All seven buttons on the mouse are programmable: Save time in sticky situations by putting superpowered attacks and eye-catching moves right at your fingertips.

Xbox 360™ Wireless Controller for Windows®
Recommended Genres: Action/Arcade, Casual, Racing, Sports

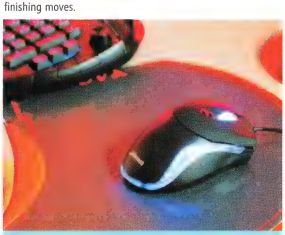
• Intuitive design and responsive handling make the controller your best bet when enjoying thrill-intensive challenges—bust it out and watch your skills quickly improve. See: **Lego Stars II: The Original Trilogy™**, or any of the hundreds of great casual games compatible with Windows XP and Windows Vista.

• Ready to rumble? Connect the controller to your PC to experience racing games, flight simulations, and raging firefights in an exhilarating new way, as built-in vibration feedback literally leaves you shaking with excitement.

• Get connected with Games for Windows® LIVE, which lets you play against your Xbox 360™–owning friends in acclaimed titles like **Shadowrun™** and finally determine which dominates: keyboard/mouse or controller. You can also plug the device right into your console for immediate thrills.

Reclusa™ Gaming Keyboard
Recommended Genres: Action/Arcade, FPS, Role-Playing, Simulation, Strategy

• Swap weapons on a dime with a dozen programmable buttons that are configurable to your tastes. Jog dials and hotkeys prove especially useful, giving your mouse-warped fingers a break from level grinding or queuing up complex finishing moves.



Habu™ Laser Gaming Mouse

• The device's blue LED backlighting proves excellent for gaming in low-light conditions, so you can enjoy sprawling epics like **BioShock**™ into the wee hours. Not only will the **Reclusa** provide ambience—those macros you've created will come in exceptionally handy during extended campaigns.

• Capable of storing multiple user profiles, the keyboard can be preloaded to your tastes with a wealth of game- and genre-specific configurations. That way, no matter what disc you pop in your drive, you'll always be ready to play like a pro at the press of a button.

IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0
Recommended Genres: Action/Arcade, Adventure, FPS, Sports

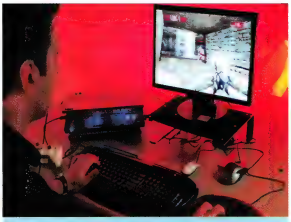
• Because the **IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0**'s scroll wheel has detents, it's easy to tell when commands have been successfully inputted. FPS and Action RPG fans especially should take note of this feature, as it helps to convey an increased level of confidence during real-time exploration and combat.

• With optical tracking that's fast and dependable, accuracy's the watchword here. Couple the device with games accordingly: It'll be that much easier to execute desperate headshots or sink that final putt.

• Capable of gliding smoothly across numerous surfaces, the **IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0** makes a reliable companion when operating under suboptimal conditions, like when you're gaming on a park bench or buddy's basement floor.

More good news: The **IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0** isn't the only legendary name making a comeback this summer, as Microsoft reaffirms itself as the final word in gaming hardware.

Stay tuned for more exciting announcements around the end of August, including a one-of-a-kind look at what the future of Games for Windows holds. Consider yourself warned....



Hot features hide within Microsoft's first-class peripherals.

IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0

THE BEST FOR LESS

Score more with GameSpring™, the casual gamer's subscription service

True story: I was recently accused of having commitment issues.

Granted, I love downloading stand-alone versions of the award-winning amusements being offered at **MSN® Games (games.msn.com)** as much as anyone. However, I'm sometimes reluctant to purchase them simply because I know that another irresistible new game will arrive days later—it's only natural.

PLAYING THE FIELD

Fortunately for my virtual love life, there's **GameSpring**.

Available from **MSN Games**, **GameSpring** is a game-rich subscription plan that allows players unlimited, ad-free access to full-featured versions of many of the leading attractions found on **MSN Games**. What's more, you can also download as many games as you desire from the ever-expanding **GameSpring** library and play from your PC just by using your Windows Live™ sign-in.

With over 100 awesome titles like **Diner Dash 2**, **Bejeweled 2**, and **Monopoly: Here & Now** to choose from, it's a beautiful sight.

THE DATING GAME

Cooler still: Membership costs just $14.99 per month for unlimited access to these amusements. That's less than the cost of a single title!

What's more, **GameSpring** offers even greater value for high-volume players. Three-month subscriptions cost a mere $38.97 ($12.99/month), and a full year costs only $95.88, an incredible $7.99/month!

Translation: For literally less than half the cost of a lone online purchase each month, you can instantly savor 100-plus mind-blowing games with tons of new games being added regularly!

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Realizing this, I guess I don't really have serious commitment issues—just trouble finding the *right* relationship worth committing to.

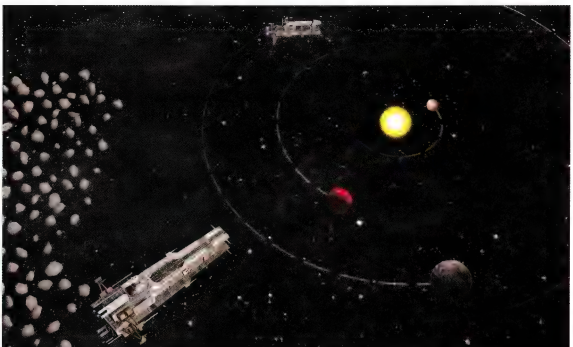
So before writing yourself off as a lifelong bachelor/bachelorette and developing short-term attachments to individual games, consider settling down and enjoying the total package on a long-term basis.

Personally, I've found the perfect match in **GameSpring** and am willing to fully commit—at least for the coming year. Now if only all relationships were this easy....

—Andy Peterson, MSN Games

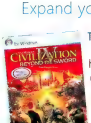
Top 10 GameSpring Games

1. Monopoly: Here & Now
2. The Treasures of Montezuma
3. Zodiac Tower
4. Virtual Villagers
5. The Legend of El Dorado
6. Atlantis Quest
7. Abundante
8. Cake Mania
9. Diner Dash 2
10. Zuma



Kingdom Come

Expand your desktop horizons with Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword



Think you've seen it all?

Guess again: Despite simulating the whole of human history and the lives, times, and struggles of mankind's most famed leaders in stunning 3D, worldwide smash hit **Sid Meier's Civilization IV**'s once again about to blow the lid off sociology. Enter all-new expansion pack **Beyond the Sword**, which offers 16 new leaders, 11 new scenarios, 10 new civilizations, five new wonders, additional units/buildings/technologies, and options to form corporations or spy on adversaries.

From founding empires to battling natural disasters and even rocketing into space in high-tech starfighters to conquer the cosmos, the game's creators are all too happy to educate players about the most exciting elements of the biggest *Civ* expansion pack ever.

CORE GAME ADDITIONS

By Alex Mantzaris, Designer/Programmer, Firaxis Games

"We've added a ton of great stuff. Corporations consume specific resources in order to provide benefits to their city and make the second half of the game more exciting. Espionage adds a whole new dimension—its importance to your empire is now comparable to scientific research, culture, or income from taxes. Random events give **Civilization IV** even more historical flavor and immersion. Advanced Starts are a pre-game setup phase players use to purchase cities, improvements, buildings, technologies, and units. Also, there's now a new way to win the game through the Apostolic Palace. This is a wonder that allows a religion to play a major part in international affairs centuries before the United Nations makes [its] appearance."

FINAL FRONTIER SCENARIO

By Jon Shafer, Designer/Programmer, Firaxis Games

"Final Frontier takes place in the distant future. Mankind has recently started colonizing distant star systems. When all appears to be going well, the new colonies mysteriously lose contact with the Earth. Players begin as one of these scattered colonies, each with a unique background and different strengths/weaknesses.

Beginning in 2302 AD, each faction must explore, colonize, and conquer the universe as normal. A number of details on the history of Final Frontier will be presented to players as they research new technologies. All units in Final Frontier will be new but have rough parallels to core game staples. There are no land units in the scenario, only starships. Non-combat units include Colony and Construction Ships. There are also three tiers of combat units which include Scouts, Invasion Ships, Destroyers, Carriers, and even Starbases, plus many more."

AFTERWORLD SCENARIO

By Tim McCracken, QA Manager, Firaxis Games

"We are completely alone in this future. Part of its technological luxury involves being able to unplug your consciousness and become physically indentured for decades.

Military forces are all but nonexistent. In their place are the Bodytanks, capable of calming the harshest of conflicts without causing devastation, for [these] units utilize non-lethal weaponry. If lethal force was ever necessary, well, they didn't earn the name 'Gravebringers' for being friendly. After unusual events occur and a science team mysteriously disappears, a squad of Gravebringers is sent in.

[As you can see,] I went in a different direction than the typical scenario. My goal is to emulate a dungeon crawl. Of course, while **Beyond the Sword** may initially seem like a refuge for sci-fi addicts only, history fans, fantasy fanatics, and destruction seekers will all find something to like.

Historically inclined players can leap headfirst into World War II in Road to War, travel the Silk Roads in Crossroads of the World, or become Holy Roman Emperor in Charlemagne. For [armchair generals,] there's the near-future Next War scenario. **Beyond the Sword** even has two unique fantasy-based scenarios: Fall from Heaven: Age of Ice and Gods of Old. So whether you're an avaricious antiquarian or Earth-shatterer-in-training, **Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword**'s many choices will satisfy your cravings."

The SIXER sweepstakes

Subscribe Now and be Entered to Win A Sony Online Entertainment Game Pack!

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine, the foremost authority on PC gaming, is giving away 10 Sony Online Entertainment Game Packs.

*Each Game Pack includes the following games, plus a free 90-day Station Access™ subscription:

- Vanguard: Saga of Heroes™
- PlanetSide®
- EverQuest® II
- EverQuest® The Anniversary Edition
- *Star Wars* Galaxies®
- *The Matrix Online*

(Retail Value: $200)

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http://gfw.1up.com/go/gamepack

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Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

SOE
SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

TEEN
T
Blood and Gore
Mild Language
Partial Nudity
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol
Violence
1-800-771-3772 or www.esrb.org
Game experience may change during online play.

* For new accounts only; voids any game time included with individual games. Winners will not be entitled to any game time which may be offered or included with certain versions of these six (6) SOE titles.

Internet connection required. Players are responsible for all applicable internet fees. Additional recurring subscription fees apply after 90-day Station Access subscription period included with this offer. Valid credit card required to pay for all such recurring subscription fees.

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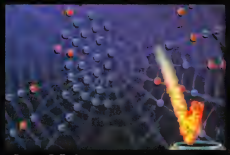
(6/07)

Extend

Where your games live on forever!

• Peggle's freaky monkey-face level.

• Flo is less than pleased.



• Dragon Bailey!

• Zzzzzzzzzz...

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TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

CASUAL GAMES

Who's the most casual? Tom vs. Bruce in *Peggle*, *Diner Dash*, and *Solitaire*!

PEGGLE **www.popcap.com** DINER DASH **www.playfirst.com** WINDOWS SOLITAIRE **Start|All Programs|Games|Solitaire**

COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

Since PC games will soon be nothing but *World of WarCraft* and casual games, and since Tom and Bruce have already done *World of WarCraft* twice, they've finally resigned themselves to going head-to-head in a series of casual games. This month, they present some of the most wildly popular, wildly profitable, and wildly prosaic games you've probably never played because you're too busy with the latest triple-A licensed boondoggle.

BRUCE: I love casual games, because no matter how many hit points I have or what my magic sword bonus is, they only last about 10 minutes. Let's say you're talking to the president, but he got called away from the phone on important business. You have 10 minutes to kill. By the time you choose your character's facial features, pick a name, choose a class, and create the rest of your party, you've kept the president waiting for 20 minutes. Much better to play a casual game! If you're the kind of person who would use those 10 minutes to silently review your presidential talking points for the hundredth time, you're probably not the kind of person who is playing games in the first place.

TOM: My briefing to the current president would consist of various ways of calling him a dumbass, so I wouldn't need to review my talking points. This gives me a lot of freedom to play hardcore games and be a hardcore gamer. Which sounds pretty stupid, but it's what you have to call it when you're the opposite of someone who plays casual games.

PEGGLE

TOM: I play a lot of *Peggle* on my laptop, which I keep open on the desk beside my main computer. I play en route from Bree to the Barrow-downs on autorun, going to meet the rest of my Fellowship. When we need to rest to recover power, I can swivel slightly to the left to fire off a *Peggle* ball and watch it work its way down, down, down, up!, down, up!, down. I've even played during that brief downtime waiting for my first refinery to be built in *C&C3*. *Peggle* is the perfect way for a busy gamer to keep himself occupied during the in-between moments. It's like Spackle. Plus, there's really no skill involved, which takes a lot of pressure off the player. If you play *Peggle* enough times, you will win. With only a mild degree of perseverance, you're guaranteed to get through the story mode, which introduces you to talking unicorns and whatnot, each with their own special balls. Bruce and I will play three random *Peggle* levels with random characters. Best two out of three wins.

BRUCE: I never really understood *Peggle*. I mean, yeah, I get that it is like a pinball game but with sapient animals. But unlike some of the other casual games I've tried, I never really get that, "Man, I gotta play *Peggle*!" feeling. If I cleared a level, I would kind of feel obligated to play the next level, just to see if the skateboarding beaver would come and tell me anything. But failure to progress was nice because then I felt like I was justified in doing something else. Sometimes I would kind of lose interest in the middle of the level and hope the ball would fall into the missile silo soon so I could quit. I know—everybody is all like, "Whoa, this guy is immune to the *Peggle* disease! He must be a Soviet sleeper agent or one of those things from that *Star Trek* episode where the guy on another planet could see Earth through a telescope and tried to re-create it, but nothing had any taste because you can't see how stuff tastes!" And I'm saying, yes, that's both possible and likely. But that doesn't make *Peggle* a more important game *qua* game than *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, which is what someone said on the 1UPcom boards. Essentially, I may have deleted some swear words and stuff. Which reminds me: How come *The New Republic* can say "f****" but *Games for Windows* magazine can't, even though the average computer gamer is 31? None of these questions is answered by *Peggle*.

TOM: My first game is the spiderweb level, which is awesome because the screen is full of evenly spaced pegs. But I get the pyramid-wing beaver, which sucks. I manage to rack up six free balls, so there's pretty much no way I'm not going to clear this level. At the end, the stupid ball goes into the 10,000 point cup. My score is 220,380.

BRUCE: The whole game is dependent on the hypnotic effect of pinball bumpers. Do you like watching where the ball will go? If so, then fine. Frankly, I think this is one of those tech-worker in-jokes that people who don't sit at computers all day won't quite understand. I watched the ball get me 134,000 points. You need to do better next time, ball.

TOM: My second game is the freaky monkey-face level, and I get the dragon who makes a fireball if you hit the special green peg. On my third ball, I get a double fire! I execute a sweet bounce with the first fireball, cutting a swath thought the pegs, but I botch the second fireball. *Peggle* giveth, *Peggle* taketh away. So now I've ripped the monkey's face wide open and I have six balls left. On my next ball, I get a sweet long shot, a purple peg, and three orange pegs. I get down to two balls and two orange pegs left, but they're behind obstacles. This is like bowling an 8-10 split! My penultimate ball misses either orange peg, but it goes into the free-ball bucket. Still two balls and still obstacles to clear. I manage to get one of the orange pegs and the free-ball bucket again! On my last ball, I have to pull off a bank shot around an intervening peg to hit the last orange peg. I get it! I have beaten the freaky monkey face and earned 139,100 points.

BRUCE: Here is the secret to *Peggle*: You want Renfield. This is possibly the most cryptic Tom Waits reference I have ever seen, which doesn't mean you'll like *Peggle* if you like *Rain Dogs*. Still, having your pinball flow through to the top when it goes off the bottom is great, because it will almost always get you an extra ball by hitting the 25,000-point threshold. On some of the challenge boards, you can get multiple extra balls if you can chain the Renfield ability and hit 75,000 points. Like almost every power-up, you want to use it at >

● A restaurant full of hungry people plus Tom equals a restaurant full of hungry people.

the beginning, because it is more effective with more pegs on the board. I used to think that the unicorn power—seeing where a ball will bounce—was pretty cool. Until I played about twice, at which point I felt I had at least as good a grasp of imaginary physics as a horse with a pointy horn on its head. Once you've figured out where the first few bounces will go, the rest is totally up to the beavers. And if you're saying that no, you can figure out where the ball will bounce on the seventh ricochet, I'm saying that you really need to invest that energy in something that doesn't involve unicorns. Unfortunately, I don't get Renfield—I get that wacky Egyptian cat. Who is—surprise—pretty useless. I clear the level but get 138,000 points. I get exactly the same score on the next one, with the lobster.

TOM: I wouldn't begin to know how to describe what this level is. It's got these curving patterns on either side and a lot of junk in the middle. My character makes explosions when I hit the green pegs. It's an unremarkable round, but as I clear the last orange peg, the ball plunks neatly into the 100,000-point cup. With my good luck, I have truly earned the "Ode to Joy" that plays at the end of the round. My score is 206,710.

PEGGLE WINNER: TOM

DINER DASH

BRUCE: *Diner Dash* is possibly the most clever—or, in game-journalism speak, "innovative"—game idea I've ever seen. You are a waitress. You also play one in *Diner Dash*, where the goal is to serve your customers before they get mad and storm out of the restaurant. The board, or map, or whatever you call the playing area in a casual game (which, everyone knows, isn't really a game) is a restaurant with a bunch of tables for diners. Tables can seat two, four, or six, and you have to manage the parties who show up at the greeter's podium, seat them, take their orders, bring them food, bring the check, and clear the tables for the next group. You get points for each of these acts you successfully perform, and a multiplier for chaining the same action, which is how you rack up hella points. The dramatic tension arises from the fact that the longer the eaters wait for whatever they need (getting their orders taken, getting their food, or check) the less happy they are. How happy they are determines how much you make in tips, based on a couple of outrageously bigoted stereotypes (college students and seniors are cheap, while businesswomen are generous) that are nonetheless relentlessly accurate. Further establishing this game's bona fides as an ultrarealistic business-management sim, college students hang out longer before asking for the check, while senior citizens take longer to do anything, and businesswomen are very impatient. Special scenarios have you simultaneously accommodating parties comprised of the entourages of Newt Gingrich and Pacman Jones. You get bonuses for seating eaters wearing certain colored clothes in matching colored seats, which represent their political affiliations.

TOM: I didn't realize the part about political affiliations, but being the kind of guy who wants to call the president a dumbass, I feel better about leaving red people waiting in line and giving preferential treatment to the little blue people. Not that it helps my score. I am terrible at *Diner Dash*. Play is excruciating. I get flustered and then it makes my stomach hurt. Plus, I've waited tables. I think I have post-traumatic stress disorder from the time I was opening a wine bottle for a table. The manager came afterward and hissed angrily at me for doing it wrong. "You're not cutting the head off a chicken," he scolded, demonstrating the right way to do it. So when I put two blue people and one red person at a table with four red seats just after a group of four red people has come into the diner, I start looking around to see if I'm going to get in trouble.

Bruce and I will play three endless shifts at medium difficulty. In the first one, I make 8,848 points before the diner collapses under the weight of my ineptitude.

BRUCE: *Diner Dash* definitely is frustrating, which I'm sure makes it a lot like real waitressing. This uncompromising humiliation makes it both a hardcore sim and an action-role-playing game. It is also like a hardcore sim in its ability to draw me in for brief periods and leave me resigning in disgust. But, like in a role-playing game, I keep wanting to hit the next level, which levels up both my table capacity and appetizer abilities. If I were to actually describe this game to a normal person—meaning someone who doesn't play games—they would think I was making it up. If I were to describe this to a gamer, they would call me a n00b. Which is ridiculous, because *Diner Dash* has all the elements of real-time strategy without the annoying rock-paper-scissors derivative gameplay. It also doesn't have Elves. Unless you count the customers with green outfits.

TOM: The whole idea of this terrible, terrible game is that you're confronted with multiple tasks that are impossible to do at once, so you have to quickly prioritize them while more tasks pile on. However, I have found that playing *Diner Dash* can improve several real-world skills, such as real-time strategy game micromanagement, keeping a party healed during a raid gone bad, and working on a Tom vs. Bruce article in one window while playing *Peggle* in another. Rats, the ball went into the 10,000-point hole.

BRUCE: Sounds like Tom is describing a real-time strategy game there. The key to *Diner Dash* is getting everyone to eat at the same time. This is even more important when the appetizer cart shows up, because using the appetizers to satisfy your customers breaks the continuity chains of your other actions. In fact, if some guy at some university were to use this as a basis for studying restaurant management—which is probably already happening—you would have to conclude that appetizers make your customers more angry than not, because you can never serve them in time to keep them from getting mad. If, of course, you staff your entire restaurant with only one waitress.

TOM: I'm so bad at *Diner Dash* that I didn't even know there was an appetizer cart. Hey, I just got a long shot after hitting one of the purple bonus point pegs. Sweet!

BRUCE: That's actually one of the most frequent emotions engendered by *Diner Dash*—getting mad. That's not surprising, because the whole premise of the game is that people slowly, inexorably get madder and madder unless you wait on them. If that's not social commentary disguised as gaming, then I'm not Hannah Arendt. I'll leave the 5,000-word follow-up article to *The Escapist*.

TOM: On my second game, I barely broke 10,000 points, but I managed to get Flo a nice pair of new shoes. On my third game, the diner shut down after I made only 6,742 points. Ouch. However, in the process, I dropped the *Peggle* ball in the 100,000-point cup twice!

BRUCE: Thanks to me, Flo opened up her fourth restaurant just now. Nice work, Flo!

DINER DASH WINNER: BRUCE

SOLITAIRE

TOM: Bruce and I will now play the ultimate casual game. *Solitaire for Windows* is probably the single most popular computer game ever. Even your mom has played it. Heck, her mom has probably even played it. Now Bruce and I will play it.

Unfortunately, the newest version of *Solitaire* requires Vista. There is no way I'm installing Vista until at least the first service pack update. So unfortunately, Bruce and I have to play the old version of *Solitaire* that ships with Windows XP. As before, we'll play three games and compare scores. I'll be playing the deck that has astronauts on it and Bruce will be playing the deck that has the cute little green cartoon frogs.

BRUCE: I remember this game! I wonder what these frogs do.

TOM: Game one: 81 points, then I'm stuck. Lame. On my second game, I get lots of points and then lose most of them when I turn to my laptop to play a few rounds of *Peggle*, and then quickly log onto *Lord of the Rings Online* to check the Auction House. Apparently, *Solitaire* is real time, because you lose points the longer you take to play. When I turn back to Solitaire, I have only zero points. I managed to earn another 31 before getting stuck again. On my third game, I'm pretty sure I'm stuck at 65 points and decide to quit before my score gets lower. One of the biggest challenges in *Solitaire* is not falling asleep, so even if Bruce wins, I consider it a moral victory that I stayed awake. My total score is 177.

BRUCE: My best score is 177. Thousand. ●

SOLITAIRE WINNER: BRUCE

UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

At the new consignment house on Talos Island, Wentworth's employees always seem happy to help you—even if they can't see you.

CITY OF HEROES: ISSUE 9–BREAKTHROUGH

Mad scientists, rejoice!

PUBLISHER: **NCsoft** DEVELOPER: **Cryptic Studios** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Downloadable Patch** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, *City of Heroes* or *City of Villains*, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Live version 14.20070508.2T**

PATCH REVIEW

City of Heroes/City of Villains developer Cryptic Studios always releases new content for its dynamic superhero MMORPG duo in the form of free comic book–style "issues." The current ninth issue, titled *Breakthrough*, adds the usual stuff for these sorts of updates—such as various costume pieces and a new high-level Task Force mission—and also revises the popular Hamidon raid encounter, which pits players up against a giant blob. Yeah, an exciting fight with a blob...made even more exciting now that Cryptic's excised most of the raid's frustration factors. That's not really the big news, though.

WIDGETS AND GEARS

What makes *Breakthrough* important is the inclusion of a new invention system that lets you craft enhancements for your hero's superpowers. Whenever you defeat an opponent, you now have a chance of finding a piece of salvage or an invention recipe for some new enhancement or costume piece.

These salvage items run the gamut of stuff you could define as random junk: computer viruses, funky tattoos, and magic weapons you can't actually wield, just to name a few. Collect all the pieces required by a recipe, and you can whip up a new toy for yourself—one that might even yield multiple bonuses to one of your powers at the same time.

Basically, the invention system introduces the same loot-farming routine present in just about every other MMO...and, by itself, that'd *really* suck when applied here. After all, the biggest weakness in *COH/COV* is the inexorable grind, especially in needing to replace your perpetually expiring power enhancements as you climb in level. How can the need to farm endless amounts of invention salvage *on top of that* be a good thing?

GOING ONCE, GOING TWICE, SOLD!

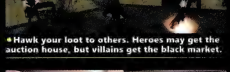
Thankfully, *Breakthrough* also includes the addition of consignment houses (and a black market for villains) that you can use to buy and sell salvage and recipes. The Windows Explorer–style interface makes it a little hard to find what you want to buy at times—and I can't help but wonder why you're forced to click a button to acknowledge that you sold something before you can get paid—but overall, the system works just fine. The key thing is, if you take the time to sell your salvage on the auction block, you can earn all the influence (*COH*'s currency) that you'll likely ever need. So, *Breakthrough* winds up alleviating the grind...and you wind up enjoying the game a lot more.

Granted, you'd think Cryptic would've made this update a long time ago, since the whole auction-house thing is pretty standard in MMOs at this point—but either way, *Breakthrough* constitutes a big step in the right direction for *COH/COV*. Now, if only Cryptic would do something to alleviate the barbaric concepts of experience debt and outleveled mission contacts...*that'd* be the real breakthrough. ● **Matthew Chase**

THE INVENTION SYSTEM INTRODUCES THE SAME LOOT-FARMING ROUTINE PRESENT IN EVERY OTHER MMO

Hawk your loot to others. Heroes may get the auction house, but villains get the black market.

Toting around a bunch of heavy salvage can be a real pain—especially with the limited inventory space you've got. Fortunately, you can use safe-deposit boxes to stash it.



That's Shady Mia standing over there by the edged weaponry. I wonder what she'd want in exchange for the tactical nuke in the crate?

VERDICT

- **Auction houses add a lot more variety to your character options.**
- **Some minor auction house interface gripes.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

CRISIS ON INFINITE SE

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

THIS MONTH: FRIENDSHIP FOR TEH WIN: A CAUTIONARY TALE

COLUMN

Miguel Lopez

Thanks to *World of WarCraft*, Miguel will probably never achieve anything notable in his entire life.

For a year now, I've teetered on the edge of quitting *World of WarCraft* altogether. I've done it all—leveled alts, survived the honor grind, and endured the senseless tedium of 40-man raids. I went on hiatus for a couple of months prior to the launch of *The Burning Crusade* with the intent of taking a long look at my relationship with *WOW*. By this point, I knew what I loved: PVP. Slaying Internet monsters in order to get good enough gear to kill newbies wasn't a worthwhile proposition for me. To my delight, however, all that I'd heard about the post-expansion PVP game sounded very promising: Gear acquired through PVP would, in most cases, trump raid gear when it came to fighting other players. A brilliant move on Blizzard's part, and the singular factor that kept me from canceling my account.

Fast-forward to mid-February. My Rogue had long since dinged level 70, and I was essentially

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

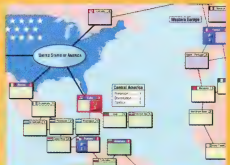
I've complained about the dearth of simple-yet-engrossing computer strategy almost since I started writing this column. But some war gamers are filling that gap using Rodney Kinney's VASSAL application, which he originally wrote to facilitate online *Advanced Squad Leader* 10 years ago. Now module designers are writing game conversions that really take advantage of the engine, and the results are sometimes stunning.

One of the most impressive modules has to be for *Twilight Struggle*, GMT Games' superlative take on the Cold War. The game itself is a quite simple (yet extremely clever) combination of card play and area control, in which players vie to dominate strategic regions of the globe while avoiding nuclear war. The board game is pretty clean in that

People afraid to buy a board game they'd never play...

it doesn't have a lot of fiddly counters or number crunching, and the VASSAL module really drives this home. While it doesn't police the rules for you or act as A.I., it does a great job of managing the display in context-sensitive ways that are unique to the game itself. And it does so with style, because the module designers adapted the artwork to the medium without losing its originality.

It's pretty clear that simple-yet-deep games of this type aren't about to proliferate as computer



...can now get it and play online easily.

games. But the *Twilight Struggle* module shows off just how good these designs really are, and it makes them available to people who would otherwise have no one to play with. Heck, you can check out the game's rules yourself by downloading them from the GMT Games website (www.gmtgames.com). Imagine the possibilities for game designers.

You can download the VASSAL engine (and its modules) from www.vassalengine.org.●

RVERS

living in *WOW*'s Battlegrounds, gearing up in preparation for the Arena system's launch. I began soliciting players to join my (ill-fated) 5-vs.-5 team. Long story short: I couldn't find enough "good" players to fill a five-person roster, so I settled on starting a 3-vs.-3 team. Throughout the course of one week, the problem players were kicked to the curb, and the roster solidified. This is when I began to realize what this newly acquired competitive drive was doing to me.

"A FRIEND LOVES AT ALL TIMES, AND KINSFOLK ARE BORN TO SHARE ADVERSITY"

Plainly speaking, I wanted to win—and winning meant recruiting the best players I could find. By my reckoning, all the close friends I played with weren't necessarily the "best." Indeed, I ended up alienating a few people in my quest for "teh win." Perhaps karmic retribution is to blame for why my team ultimately floundered.

We started out well enough; our gimpy combination of Rogue, Hunter, and Shaman did OK despite the relatively weak matrix. We topped out at around 1,800 points when the highest-rated teams were just breaching 2,000. We were casual as well—we only fought the requisite 10 matches per week, my rationale

All dressed up with nowhere to go....

being that the 3-vs.-3 team was a placeholder for the 5-vs.-5 team that I aspired to build. I had big plans.

"PHILOSOPHICAL BUILDING BLOCKS FOR WINNING AT *WOW* ARENAS AND AT LIFE"

Unfortunately for my budding team, the launch of the Arena system happened right around the time ESPN aired an awesome documentary about UCLA's legendary basketball coach, John Wooden. Immediately, I began copy-and-pasting *WOW*-flavored Wooden quotes to my teammates over AIM. The stream was relentless—but they humored me, bless their souls.

In the end, though, they didn't suffer me too long. Right around when *The Lord of the Rings Online*'s beta hit, the Shaman left. Soon after, my Hunter got into a pretty solid 5-vs.-5 team...and, naturally, the 3-vs.-3 took a backseat. Perhaps all the motivational propaganda

"Ring of Blood?" More like Ring of Tears. My own—and those of the countless newbs who've been smashed therein.

wound up getting to them. I was left in the lurch—a half-equipped Rogue (not a terribly hot commodity in 5-vs.-5, in case you're wondering) without an Arena team. My prospects were grim indeed.

But this story can't end with me quitting *WOW* and finding some productive channel for all my competitive energy. Quite the contrary: Disillusioned with the Rogue class, I've decided to start leveling my old Warrior alongside an old buddy's new Paladin. A cheesy 2-vs.-2 combo—and one that hopefully evades the nerf bat for a while more.

In retrospect, I should have tempered my competitive ambition with a sense of the big picture, 'cause in the end, I wound up with what amounts to jack—no Arena team, a few disgruntled friends, and a lot of wasted effort. I hope to get it right with this second go. With one caveat: All my Rogue friends are out of luck. If my Rogue can't play, then neither can anyone else's.

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

Simple game mechanics, tidy downloads, and low price are the three points of the casual-gaming pyramid of success. But just in case those points are just a bit too...well, *pointy* for you, a couple of casual gaming websites assiduously sand down those pyramid tips so you don't poke

SIMPLE FLASH-BASED GAMES NO DOWNLOADS AND THE LOW LOW PRICE POINT OF FREE

your eye out. Titans like PopCap aren't about to be overtaken by these upstarts, but they should pay close attention.

One such casual gaming website is Kongregate (www.kongregate.com), which smooths all three success points with very simple Flash-based games, no downloads, and the low, low price point of...free. Such a low barrier to entry is usually synonymous with low quality, but not here—this site features a bunch of really addictive little games, from weird arcade puzzlers like *rotaZion* to simple shooters like *The Endless Zombie Rampage* and *Boxhead*. Since Kongregate titles don't enjoy the luxury of even a 30MB download, they rely on a stylishly stripped-down aesthetic that the best of the games—like the platformer *The Fancy Pants Adventures*—use to great advantage. How does Kongregate attract such high-caliber games? By offering cash to the developers: Users vote for their favorites, and the site doles out the dough (as of this writing, upward of $40,000 went to 60 winners since the beta version of the site went live in March).

Fans of more mainstream casual fare like the solid match-three game *Cradle of Rome* or the incredibly popular *Mystery Case Files* series should check

Guess what you do in Kongregate's *The Endless Zombie Rampage*?

out iWin.com, which offers these and tons of other games for just $10. Don't let the weird little iCoins subscription plan scare you off: You really *are* paying just half the price for these games and not getting charged extra for the privilege. The half-price program comes with all sorts of community-building features (things that Kongregate does better, incidentally)...but the bottom line is all that matters here: superpopular games at a superlow price.

SOUND OFF

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

XTRAS

GFW RADIO
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

THE CREW

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Every week, the editors of *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by a recent podcast.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Too many console games?

SEAN: Cover story on *Gears of War*. Review of *Halo 2*, *Shadowrun*, *Overlord*, *Mercenaries 2*, *Fallout 3*, and *Call of Duty 4* are all coming out for consoles.... We're a PC gaming mag, right?
DARREN: This month, I feel like we're getting a console's used-up sloppy seconds. Nothing against *Gears*, of course—that game continues to look hot. It'd just be nice to play a game that people designed with a keyboard and mouse in mind.
SEAN: Credit to *Gears* for at least trying not to seem like charity work. They're adding a whole new five-chapter act to clean up that big Brumak narrative tease—presumably adding a whole new narrative tease—and at least we're not all sitting here playing the *Gears 2* beta on our Xbox 1080s.
DARREN: Epic's always been great with providing postrelease content gratis. Extra levels, weapons, play modes—you name it. I just hope that we don't have to drop MS points to get the extras.
JEFF: *Gears* does seem like an example of a port being done more "right," but it'd still be cooler if the universe could evolve to a point where we can just get simultaneous launches for every product, and gamers could just buy it for the platform of their choice. I have a really hard time believing that if a game like, say, *Halo 3*, came out on PC at the same time as the 360 version, that it would eat into the 360 sales that much. Maybe I'm just a dreamer, like John Lennon. Imagine there's no platforms—it's easy if you try.
SHAWN: That Epic's tweaking *Gears* for mouse and keyboard rather than designing for the interface from the ground up isn't irking me much. The game isn't another *Halo*, isn't a console take on ephedrine-fueled PC FPSing, and that matters enormously. Marcus won't seem to move like he just left the intensive care unit, simply because I'm not expecting "sprint, strafe, sprint"–style shooting.
SEAN: Honestly, even if *Halo 3* did come out for PC simultaneously, I'd probably play it on Xbox, since the game's designed for it anyway. Unless it had cross-platform co-op. That would be rad... I play co-op games at home, so any alternative to console splitscreen is golden.
SHAWN: Now, if *Gears 2* comes out for PC and 360 simultaneously....
SEAN: OK, so then I'd pick PC. I think. I haven't tried the PC version of *Gears* yet, so maybe there'll be some funkiness I didn't anticipate. Looking at my history, I chose *Oblivion* for PC over Xbox 360, even though I knew my PC at the time wasn't as powerful as my 360. Is that telling somehow?
JEFF: I too chose *Oblivion* for PC rather than for Xbox 360. I got both copies on the same day and just instinctively went for the PC. Why? Mostly because I was thinking about mods, patches, and so on. And ye olde keyboard and mouse. With a theoretical *Gears 2*, it's definitely harder to say. But I would contend again, because I like repeating myself, that putting it out on PC simultaneously does not seem to me like something that would cannibalize or diminish Xbox 360 sales. I just don't see it. All it would be doing would be expanding the exposure, the fan base, for the franchise.
SEAN: I bet the people making those decisions have tables, charts, and graphs proving exactly otherwise. I'm picturing a room full of gentlemen wearing lab coats, monkeys with Xbox controller inputs wired to their brains, and chalkboards with calculus equations yielding the exact day and time releasing *Halo 3* on PC will maximize profit.
SHAWN: I have to add that the old "life's better on the couch" chestnut is bunk. Nowadays, I feel less immersed when my grill isn't inches away from the action.
RYAN: Yeah, that's what I told your mom.

If *Halo 3* came out on PC the same day as on Xbox 360, which version would you play?

ADVERTISER INDEX

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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Tech

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THE POOR MAN'S

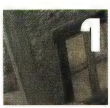
INSIDE

COLUMN
Gladstoned
How does Darren's column translate into Russian? Find out on page 100!

VIDEO PERFORMANCE TWEAKS

Everyone's getting ready to play *BioShock*; you're lucky you can play *System Shock 2*. You lug underpowered, overheavy towers to LAN parties and hang out in the back of the room so no one sees you. Your desk sags under the weight of a crusty CRT, and you keep your texture setting and life expectations low. Sound familiar?

Getting by with crap hardware is no way to live, friends. But sometimes, you've got no choice. If you have a less-than-state-of-the-art system, you'll need to resort to other options—in-game options, that is—to play the more demanding PC games. The trick is figuring out what all those options are, and what you can live without, in order to get maximum performance with minimum onscreen bilge. To do that, you first need to understand which features are the biggest performance killers. So let's run 'em all down.



ANTIALIASING/ ANISOTROPIC FILTERING

Jam your eyeballs up into that monitor of yours. Do the edges of buildings and characters in games look all jagged and jittery? That trippy stairstep pattern is the result of stacked pixels that stick out like sore thumbs. Find a fence or lattice-worked area in a game, then sidestep left and right. If it looks like the fence is crawling along, you have a problem. The easiest way to fix it is to jack up the **antialiasing (AA)**. Your graphics card smooths out object edges—but that's gonna slow things down. Set the AA level too high, and you can host a single-digit-framerate slideshow on your desktop. We've tested a number of current high-end and low-end cards at the office, and there's one rule to live by: If you don't have a bleeding-edge GPU, don't go beyond 4x AA. The visual difference between 4x and 8x is negligible and definitely not worth the performance hit. And yes, even if you wield the mighty GeForce 8800 GTX, you can push it into the red zone if you crank the AA levels hard enough (depending on the game, 8x and 16x could degrade performance).

Anisotropic filtering (AF) often tag-teams with AA. To explain how it works, let's look at something like, say, a runway. Your jet's coming in at a high angle; with AF turned up high, you can see every pockmark in the asphalt stretching off down toward the hangar. Turn it off, and its detail quickly blurs out. Games often swap in low-quality textures in the distance to save memory. AF cleans up and bridges the gap between the high- and low-quality textures. Mercifully, AF doesn't really affect graphics cards like it once did. You can jack up the settings to 4x, and it won't make a blip on a modern graphics card (although anything from the Radeon 9x00 or GeForce FX lines might still run into a couple of slowdowns). In fact, if you're packing heat, go ahead. You can probably get away with going up to 8x or 16x without your PC breaking a sweat.

SHADOWS

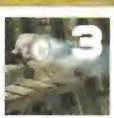
Raise your hands if you've seen a good noir flick. How about an old detective movie? So you know that shadows are important. They help set the mood. Same goes for games. The right use of shadows (and lighting—we'll get to that in a second) can spell the difference between a boring room and a dynamic one. It's easy to crack jokes about *Doom 3*. "What shadows? The entire game is pitch black!" Still, if you go back now and play it, try turning the shadows on and off and you'll see the difference. It actually adds suspense—but at the cost of game performance. Of course, that speed drop varies from game to game based on the number of shadows you'll allow in the game world and the level of shadow detail. Fortunately, many games have sliders and toggles for each.

Do you want to add shadows to every NPC and object in the game world? It'll cost ya. Same goes for shadow detail. You can opt for low-detailed shadow blobs that linger on the ground, or you can simulate the real deal. Just remember—as tempting as it may be to move the slider to the "ludicrous" setting, your CPU and GPU are drawing out every single object and shadow onscreen. While the visual difference is literally night and day (*puntastic*!), fiddle with it until you find what works best for you in terms of system performance. A good middle-of-the-road option, if available, is the use of soft shadows. >

GUIDE TO GRAPHICS

Getting the most outta what little you have

LOTRO, thanks to its customizability, can scale up to classic pretty settings.



LIGHTING

Since its prime-time debut in *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast*, **high dynamic range lighting (HDR)** is becoming an increasingly popular feature. And with good reason: It's designed to re-create how the human eye perceives light in the real world. It could be something as mundane as lens flare, having your virtual eyeballs adjust to light after walking from the shadows, or seeing light refract off a lake. Ah, but with all this eye candy comes a hefty toll on system performance. Many machines will grind along once HDR flips on.

At the moment, *The Lord of the Ring Online: Shadows of Angmar* and *Call of Juarez* number among the few games using HDR. Just keep in mind that if you're even consulting a tweaking guide like this in the first place, HDR could bring games to a crawl. If a game does offer a low setting, try it. Just consider yourself warned to keep your expectations low on older graphics cards.

TWEAK FREAK

Fine-tuning four games for maximum performance—and minimum crap

After installing yet another overclocked 1GB graphics card (SLI, no less) in that $5,000 supercomputer, you probably don't.... Wait, what's that? You haven't upgraded that rig in over a year? You're either broke, too lazy to crack the case on your PC—or a little from Column A and a little from Column B. And you're not alone. Valve recently conducted a hardware survey of Steam users, and the results were, well, interesting.

According to those polled, most people (47.04 percent) play with less than 1GB of RAM, 77.87 percent "rock" a single-core CPU, and more than 45 percent haven't bought a new graphics card in about a year and a half. Do you fall even close to these categories? Well, it's time we try and squeeze the most out of the rickety jalopy you call a computer on four demanding games.

CALL OF JUAREZ

The gunslingin' first-person shooter *Call of Juarez* is all about HDR and Shader Model 3.0.

Shaders—A shader refers to the special effects applied to an object. If you have anything in the Radeon X1000 or GeForce 6600 families (or higher), you can turn on Shader Model 3.0—and all its crazy special features. This includes HDR. Performance problems? Dial back individual features or drop down to Shader Model 2.0.

Long Load Times—Every time you switch settings, the game generates a folder ([game's main directory]\Out\cache\Shaders\) that houses thousands of tiny files detailing everything from shadow maps to textures. *But*, once you stick to your guns and find a setting you like, you still have to wait. Why? The game still needs to load these thousands of files before starting a lap around the ponderosa. To optimize performance and load times, here's a tip...followed by a humongoid caveat. In that Shaders directory, delete all the subfolders. Now quit and defrag your hard drive. Some people have reported that removing this directory caused errors. So play it safe by removing the offending Shader files and storing 'em in a temp directory.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

With all the postrelease content, mods, and tweaks, *Oblivion* remains on many hard drives even a year after its release. It can be a beautiful-looking game—if you're willing to sacrifice *a lot* of game performance.

Stuttering—Noticing some st-st-stuttering as you roam? Patches will fix some issues, but hey, the game loads an entire world—roughly 5GB of data—every time you play. Defrag that hard drive immediately! Another tip: Do a 360-degree spin once you start playing. That little pirouette just helped load in a little of the world.

Mods—Don't want to muck around tweaking code? Mods can do it for you Places like tessource.net and planetelderscrolls.com have piles of files worth using. The short list includes Qarl's Texture Pack III (for high-res textures), Noise Replacer (texture noise replacer), and a whole bunch of LOD texture replacement packs.

V-sync—Want to get a little extra boost? Uncork the frames-per-second bottleneck by disabling V-sync. The only catch is that you *might* notice some image tearing at the edges of the screen. If it's really an eyesore, go back to V-sync-ing—no harm, no foul.

IF YOU HAVE A WEAKSAUCE GPU–AROUND THE GEFORCE 7600 GT LEVEL–YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO LIVE WITH COMPROMISES.

4 TEXTURE MAPPING

Think of **texture mapping** as the skin that wraps over the in-game polygonal models. It could be something simple like the billion look-alike crates you bash apart, or it can be an incredibly detailed face with 5 o'clock shadow. You can spot the difference between high- and low-quality textures in a heartbeat. One yields an amazing amount of detail—cracks in walls, zits on faces, whatever—the other, well, it works and lets you play the game. That's when you start relying on a great art style, like in *World of WarCraft*, to hide the low-detail blemishes. But we digress. Install some games, and they'll automatically draw high-resolution textures once they detect a high-end videocard sporting tons of memory.

Have you ever played a game that takes two lifetimes to load (*Battlefield*, we're looking at you)? That's because the game needs to load every single texture into memory. Are you looking for faster load times and improved in-game performance? Then you'll need to adjust your video settings—and your expectations—just a smidge.

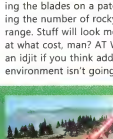
Here's a quick look at what settings to use:

Video RAM < 128MB: Run low- and medium-level textures on new games.

Video RAM > 256MB: Now you're entering medium- to high-detail territory.

Video RAM > 512MB: This is only for the hardest of hardcore cards—you can roll with ultrahigh detail.

One last thing to keep in mind is that the differences between the detail levels can be a little subtle as you jack your resolution higher. Of course, your mileage may vary depending on games, so do a little tinkering and see what works best for you.



5 MODEL/GEOMETRY DETAIL AND DRAW DISTANCE

In some games, you can modify the landscape. It could be something like showing the blades on a patch of grass or increasing the number of rocky details on a mountain range. Stuff will look more realistic, sure, but at what cost, man? AT WHAT COST?!? You're an idjit if you think adding more detail to the environment isn't going to slow your PC some.

Now, couple that with the **draw distance** (an adjustable setting in many games), and you can have a downright beautiful screenshot. However, without the right hardware to back it up, that's all you'll get. One screen...and then another—maybe nine frames per second if you're lucky. Look at something like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* or *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* for an example of how it works. Crank up all the settings and draw that sucker out to the horizon. Now watch as the world slows down.

What's happening? Well, when you're messing with model detail and draw distance, you're setting the limits of how much and how far out the graphics card needs to render. If you have a weaksauce GPU—say, around the GeForce 7600 GT/Radeon X1300 XT level—you're gonna have to live with compromises. Hey, I'm not saying it's time to dial back the draw distance so that you're walking through a San Francisco fog bank. *Nobody* wants that. However, maybe you should turn down the model detail and set the draw distance at the halfway point. Start there and see what results work best. • **Darren Gladstone**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

Like *Oblivion*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is a system hog.

Lights—You have multiple light rendering options here. With object and full dynamic lighting comes DX9 HDR, and slow-as-molasses performance. The most basic setting is static lighting. This switches the game to DirectX 8. With dynamic lighting completely disabled, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* should run smooth as silk.

Switches—This game's got nearly every toggleable feature (magnable—experiment away!

Tweaks—NVTweak (available at guru3d.com) is recommended for Nvidia users. Check off "Additional Direct3D box" in NVTweak, then close the program. Fire up the ForceWare Control Panel and follow this path: Performance & Quality Settings, then Additional Direct3D Settings, and look for "Max Frames to Render Ahead." This should give a performance boost. ATI users, monkey with the "Flip Queue" setting in ATI Tray Tools (at guru3d.com).

Shortcuts—Create a shortcut: "C:\S.T.A.L.K.E.R. directory name\bin\XR_3DA.exe" -noprefetch

It speeds up load times and may actually greatly reduce in-game stuttering as well.

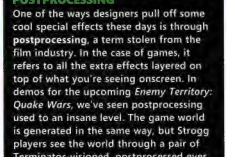
SUPREME COMMANDER

Chris Taylor's stunningly detailed RTS presents a number of challenges to your PC. Namely, you can pan the game from the global view on up down to the turret level. Kinda makes it so tough to pick which features to disable.

Details Last—Have changing detail levels for fun, because this'll allow you to pull back the world view and still have a close-up of which units are in play. Yes, you can reduce detail, and it'll replace units with icons as you pull out—but it's not as satisfying.

Shadows First—Shadows should be one the first things to go if you need to buy back performance. After all, do you really need to see the silhouettes of 400 or so units? Drawing all that chews up CPU power.

Crash Card—Sadly, most other tweaking involved in the game requires dropping money on new components. So you'll have to upgrade to better graphics cards and chase your CPUs performance jumps. Let me put it this way: Supreme Commander is not a game for you if you're slogging along with a Radeon X1300 card.



POSTPROCESSING

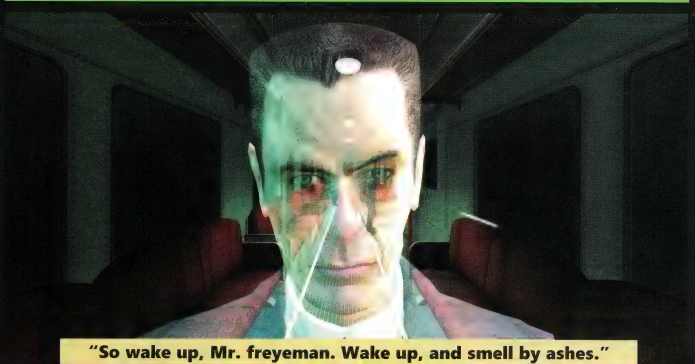
One of the ways designers pull off some cool special effects these days is through **postprocessing**, a term stolen from the film industry. In the case of games, it refers to all the extra effects layered on top of what you're seeing onscreen. In demos for the upcoming *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, we've seen postprocessing used to an insane level. The game world is generated in the same way, but Strogg players see the world through a pair of Terminator-visioned, postprocessed eyes.

Can't wait for *Quake Wars*? *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* has a great example of postprocessing effects: When you walk near a ringwraith, the Eye of Sauron falls over you. The screen becomes slightly hazy and distorted with some kind of Evil-O-Vision™. Want to see the difference? Toggle the slider, and—boom!—it's off. The game remains pretty, but it won't bog down with the extra special features. Mark my words: In the coming years, this is going to be one of the more appreciated features in games. The visual impact it can make, if done right, is downright amazing.

Most of the current graphics cards (we're talking GeForce 7800/Radeon X1900 series and up) should have little problem hosting a postprocessing party on your PC, at least at the simplest settings. If you're in GeForce 8800/Radeon X2900 territory, jacking up the effects won't drastically affect your performance.

GLADSTONED

Game Babel: When translations go bad



"So wake up, Mr. freyeman. Wake up, and smell by ashes."

COLUMN

Darren Gladstone

"Put hands or blow my leg!"

What. The. Fu—? Is this even English? Yeah, we've all had those moments playing games that were not so much localized as dumped at the border. Despite better quality control these days, you can still stumble across an otherwise inspired title that makes absolutely no sense in English.

One reader, who apparently only goes by the chick-magnet handle of Tim07z, is a lot like me. We both appreciate the finer points of bad voice acting strangling already miserable dialogue. We celebrate crap. But what if an original game coming out of a country like Poland or Korea is the real deal and we're just one good translator shy of a masterpiece? The Polish equivalent of *Half-Life 2* could've already come out, and we'd never know. To get a little more insight into the matter, I called a buddy who punches up plots and saves scripts from themselves.

"So I'm doing the translation for some Eastern European game," says my pal, "and holy crap, did these guys need help!" He paints a picture of a modern combat game that takes place on America's mean streets. The game is supposed to be gritty. And by "gritty," he means that the dialogue is filled with profanity and incorrectly used racial epithets. Like if I were to call a Japanese guy "cracker"—but way worse. Maybe that'd work for a game starring a Tourette's patient. Or not. One line from a drug-cartel bust in the game:

Police Officer 1: "Put hands or blow my leg!"

Looking at this quote a second time, I still have no idea what they want supercop to say. But I've got a couple of guesses that involve a trip to Tijuana.

This got me thinking. Bad translations go both ways. I'm sure that with even the tightest script, all it takes is one dude with a half-assed handle on language to unravel an otherwise good game.

Lacking a staff of U.N. linguists, the Internet's gonna do my dirty work. So let's see what happens when you translate *Half-Life 2* into other languages (and back again). Babelfish.altavista.com, take it away!

G-MAN, IN RUSSIAN

Original: "Rise and shine, Mr. Freeman. Rise and shine. Not that I wish to imply that you've been sleeping on the job. No one is more deserving of a rest and all the effort in the world would have gone to waste until, well, let's just say that your hour has come again. The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world. So wake up, Mr. Freeman. Wake up, and smell the ashes."

Translation: "Lift and shine, Mr. freyeman. Lift and shine. Not that I desire to imply that you they slept on the work. No one to more deserve rest and completely the effort in the world not to go to rastochitel'stvovat' to, in the best way, let's exactly to say that you will be hour they came again. Right person in the incorrect place can introduce changes completely in the world. So wake up, Mr. freyeman. Wake up, and smell by ashes."

BARNEY, IN JAPANESE

Original: "I've been working undercover with civil protection. Can't take too long as I'm already behind on my beating quota."

Translation: "I directly citizen protection and undercover am to work. When rear already it is in the allotment which I strike me you take simultaneously excessively long, it is not possible."

DR. KLEINER, IN KOREAN

Original: "Great Scott! Gordon Freeman! I'd have expected more warning."

Translation: "Company one Scott! Gordon free, man! Me warning will forecast compared to theyn the place."

And there you have it, gang—definitive proof that our games sound just as ridiculous overseas to them as their stuff does to us. Just don't ask me to translate my tech section into Russian and back. It barely makes sense reading it the first time around!

And from now on, before you send any e-mail to darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com, please translate it into Russian first.

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DOT BOMB

In the fine art of gaming seduction, less is more

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Jeff still can't chain 16 ghosts together. Tell him how to do it and he'll love you forever at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

Part of the unbearable burden of being me is going to visit game companies and looking at new games. As you might imagine, it is hell. Think of the worst possible job in the world—clean-up crew at the diarrhea clinic, for example—and you're beginning to approach the kind of nightmare it is to be paid to look at videogames for a living.

Two things in particular are always guaranteed to drive me nuts during game demos. The first is when an overenthusiastic PR weasel—who's been hovering over me the entire time while plying me with Diet Cokes and cookies—starts fishing for compliments while the demo is still in progress.

"Wow, that's cool, huh, Jeff? You ever see an Elf shoot an arrow before?"

"Dude, how great was that?! I'm totally thinking you should put this game on your cover!"

Dude, I bet you do! You know what I'm totally thinking?! I'm totally thinking you should shut up so I can hear the freakin' demo, OK?! Also, dude! What's with the ass breath! Try Altoids!

The other thing I dread in demos is the Inevitable Water Discussion. Perhaps you are not familiar with this phenomenon. I will explain it to you. The Inevitable Water Discussion is the point of the demo at which, no matter what the game is, the designer will go into an extended monologue about the apparently magnificent water that has been programmed and how I should be impressed. No one has ever made more realistic water for their game. Look at how the water shimmers in the sun. Look at how the Elf's armor reflects in the water. Would you like to drink that water, Jeff? It sure looks like you could, doesn't it?

This can go on for minutes. If it goes on long enough, past the point at which I've already thought about lunch, imagined myself floating on a raft with Jessica Alba, replayed the entire third season of *Battlestar Galactica* in my head, and clawed two deep fingernail furrows in my arm to stay awake, I can actually palpably feel my will to live begin to slip away.

Because here's the thing: I don't care about your water. I just don't. I am not playing videogames to look at realistic water. I have easy access to actual, real water. If it's that important to me, I can get a glass of that actual water and set it next to me while gaming so that I can marvel at it.

What I want from your game, and what I would like you to focus on when showing me your game—and I know this is a bit of a stretch here, so bear with me—is something we in the business like to call "fun." Perhaps you have heard of it. While I am happy for you that your education and talent have yielded such impressive results, and while I am sure your mom must be awfully proud of you—"My son made that water! Look at it!"—I humbly submit to you that, with all due respect, I won't care whether you modeled every single drop in the Atlantic Ocean with perfect scientific accuracy if the actual gaming part that takes place around that water is lame or derivative or uninspired. Logic puzzles, brainteasers, challenges of dexterity and accuracy—that's what we're in this for. Not a sales pitch for a beach house.

Which brings me to a little round yellow guy by the name of Pac-Man. All mouth, no body? Lives only in two dimensions, loves to eat, and has a problem with ghosts? Sound familiar? If you forget, or think I am about to drift into old-man nostalgia here, then you probably haven't yet played one of the best games of 2007 by far—*Pac-Man: Championship Edition* for Xbox Live Arcade. Yes, I know this is a PC gaming magazine and that mentioning a console game is akin to joining the Vichy collaborators—but in this case, I am pulling rank and saying "too bad." If you have a 360, then pony up the $10 and buy it. If you don't, then go play it at a friend's house.

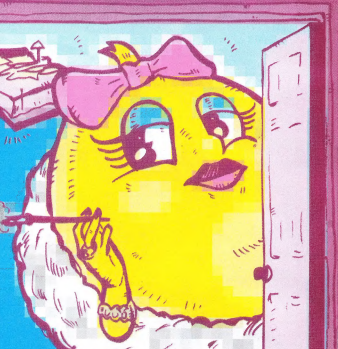

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

Because what we have in this game is Exhibit Freakin' A in the case of Gameplay over Graphics. Here we have a remake of a 27-year-old game that is little more than a few primary colors, dots, and lines on a 2D surface that, with a few clever gameplay twists, has managed to enthrall me and tons of other gamers for dozens (if not hundreds) of hours. Scoff if you want. I understand. There have been roughly 8 billion *Pac-Man* sequels and clones over the years, and the last thing it seemed the world needed was another one. But in this case (the first new *Pac-Man*, by the way, to be made with the help of Toru Iwatani, the original game's creator), we have a game that brilliantly rediscovers the Rosetta Stone of game design: Upon defeat, you simply *must* play one more time.

I am not arguing a Luddite return to the days of yore. Like you, I have marveled at the graphical splendors of *Crysis*. I have maxed out *Lord of the Rings Online* and squealed with delight at Hobbiton come to life. And I have even gazed upon the water in *Oblivion* and acknowledged that, yes, by golly, that does in fact look pretty realistic.

But for just one moment, I ask every game designer reading this to forget all that. Go play *Pac-Man: Championship Edition*. Eat those pellets. Dodge those ghosts. Zip your way through those mazes and acknowledge to yourself how little it takes to make you happy. This is gaming's bottom line. One Pac-Man eating one ghost is more powerful than all the digital water on Earth.

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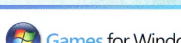

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